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Robin's pencil moved faster and faster.

ROBIN AND TITO

BY

MABEL L. ROBINSON

ILLUSTRATED BY
ELOISE BURNS

NEW YORK
THE MACMILLAN COMPANY
1930

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ROBIN AND TITO

CHAPTER I

ROBIN'S PLAN GOES AGLEY

ROBIN had stared over the garden wall at the blue sea until she could not tell it from the blue, hot sky. Blue and hot and shining! When she threw herself down in the green shade of the olive tree, the rest of the garden looked dark as the house used to look at home when she went in out of the glare of the sunlit snow. Home! If she were home in America now she would be coasting. Or if they had only taken her to Scotland with them! Coasting instead of smelling heliotrope which grew into trees. Winter was the

time for snow and fun. Yet here she was alone in a walled garden in Sicily with the hot, blue sea shining beyond.

Robin's eyes were blue, darker blue even than the sea, but they had none of its shine. They looked stormy, unhappy. Even her cap of smooth hair seemed to have lost its sheen as she crouched under the dark olive tree.

Suddenly she sat up straight. "I think I'll go away," she decided. "I'm tired of this place."

She climbed the stone steps, up through the layers of fragrance from the flower beds into the cool, damp kitchen where the housekeeper, Mrs. McGraw, was polishing a copper kettle. Robin slipped by without a word. Up the stairs through the empty, still villa. Into her own room where the windows looked out over the garden down to the shimmering blue sea. Robin closed the shutters so that she need not look at it.

At night the nightingales sang so loudly out there that she could not sleep. She would creep to her window and look down into the deep shadows of the garden where they sang. The stone floors chilled her feet, and the dark sea made her feel cold inside. She would crawl back into her enormous bed and wonder how far her father and mother had gone now.

It was five days since they had started for

Scotland. Five days with mother's old Scotch nurse for housekeeper because mother would leave her with no one else. And it would be five weeks before they came back. Robin pulled her small traveling bag from under the bed.

"I can't wait so long," she decided again. "If I go over to Scotland, they wouldn't send me back."

She had packed two pairs of pajamas and two linen dresses when she remembered that in Scotland she would not need linen dresses in February. She took them out of the bag and was hunting for the warm clothes that she had worn on the steamer, when the door opened and Mrs. McGraw walked in.

"I always knock when I go in your room," said Robin, shutting her bag with a little click.

"So you should," agreed Mrs. McGraw. "Where are you going to now, my lass?"

"Scotland," said Robin. You might as well tell Mrs. McGraw first as last. And anyway you couldn't stay cross at her because she didn't know that you were cross, and it was like crying for something with no one there to listen to you.

"Well, well," Mrs. McGraw put her hands on her hips and her eyes looked twinkly. Robin glowered at her. "And wouldn't you be a bit young to be traveling so far alone, my lassie?"

Robin did not answer. It was no use. She opened her traveling bag and folded her pajamas back into the big lower drawer which always smelled musty. Mrs. McGraw watched her without any sign of the twinkle which Robin dreaded.

"It's lonesome she is," she said as if she were talking to herself. "And it's no wonder in a heathen country where no one can understand a word a respectable Scotch woman says. But her, she can talk their mad tongue. What more does she need?"

"I need some one to listen to me talk it," explained Robin. "Talking to yourself is no fun."

"True," agreed Mrs. McGraw, "that's for the old. The young must have some one to listen." She looked troubled. "But your parents would not wish you to be playing with these ragged robins about here. They are neither good Scotch like your mother nor good American like your father."

"Then," said Robin firmly, "you might as well let me go where there is some one I *can* play with."

"Well," said Mrs. McGraw, "I don't know as you'll need to be starting to-day. It's time for the walk before you have your porridge and go to bed. And I've a good big dish of it for you to-

night. It's going to take more than this climate to get you fat again after the whooping cough." She still looked troubled. "Take a lump of sugar from the canister and who knows but we'll see the wee mouse of a donkey."

Robin pushed her bag back under the bed and trudged down the stairs to the kitchen. She was tired of porridge; her cough was nearly gone and she might just as well have gone to Scotland. It would be real winter like America there. And after all it would be a great risk to go to America. Mother had been talking of leaving her there in school next winter, when the only place in the world she wanted to be was in Florence with them.

She was tired of this empty villa, but she had liked the big studio in Florence where her father had painted and she had learned to chatter Italian with his friends. Her small sketches had made them laugh because she tried so hard to copy him. Well, what else was there to draw? Father always picked out the nicest things. Mother called him Robin's eyes, and said an artist saw things for herself; the child would be better off in an ordinary American school. No, it would certainly not be safe to go to America where she might have to stay.

But she was tired above everything of this

walled-in garden and flowers in winter. No one to play with, no one to speak to but Mrs. McGraw; and she could never think of anything to talk about to Mrs. McGraw. It was funny how mother seemed so fond of her and always called her Growley Darling. Robin preferred to stay by herself except for their daily walk. Well, they might see the donkey this afternoon. She would take two lumps of sugar in case they did.

"I'm ready, Mrs. McGraw," she called up the stairs. And she shivered a little as she heard her voice echo caw-aw-aw like a crow.

"Did you take off those shorts and put on your clean linen frock? Socks, too," Mrs. McGraw admonished. "If you must go about the garden like a half-dressed boy, I'll not take you out on the street that way. Your mother never wore clothes like that herself when she was young. Violet rays! Pooh!"

Robin disappeared up the stairs again. In a few moments she stood before Mrs. McGraw for inspection. Mrs. McGraw nodded approval at the straight linen dress and smooth cap of gold hair. "Now you look like a bonnie lassie. But," feeling of the thin arms, "each day you get a bit thinner. What will your mother say!"

Robin eyed her gravely. "She should have taken me with her," she said.

"Your mother knows what Scotland is in winter. And you with your cough. Though why any one would think this heathen country—" she broke off and shook her head. "Well, we'd best be going."

They went out into the late sunshine of the crooked little street. One thing about Mrs. McGraw, she didn't make you hold on to her hand. Robin always liked to walk down toward the end of the village where you could see the volcano. It looked so terrible and so beautiful belching fire out over its snowy peak. From one of her windows she could get a glimpse of its smoke. Sometimes when she was staring out into the shadowy garden where the nightingales were singing, she wondered what would happen if the hot lava should flow right down through these garden paths some night.

One day father had hired a car and driven them up to the edge of the last eruption. Robin could not forget the little house where the lava had crept up to the very door stone before it stopped and began to cool. How had these people felt when they saw its fiery head crawling over the garden toward them? And then Robin

shivered even more than when she looked at the dark sea, or felt the cold stone floor under her bare feet.

But in the evening sunshine, the volcano became a rosy, magic peak, and Robin liked to stand by the wall at the village end and watch the glow of its faint smoke trail. She liked to come this way, too, because it led by the house where the small gray donkey lived. Often he had not come home from his day's work, but when he had, he always stood on the stone staircase which ran up from the crooked street past his door. Robin wondered if they took him in at night through that door. There seemed no other place for him to stay. She wished that she had a small gray donkey to stay in her big, lonely room with her at night. She would not mind the nightingales so much.

Robin ran ahead and peered up the steep stone stairs. He was there! He stood delicately balanced on his small hoofs, looking at the closed door. When Robin called, "Come here!" to him, he turned a pair of wise, dark eyes in her direction. She held out one lump of sugar. He did not move. She stretched out the other hand with the second lump, one eye on Mrs. McGraw who did not approve of waste. The donkey pivoted on his

four legs bunched together, and picked his way down the steps. The small hoofs were as sure as Robin's own feet in their descent. Robin waited at the foot of the steps, her fingers closing over the sugar. When he had reached her, he nuzzled her closed fists with a soft, cool nose until they were so damp and sticky that she opened one hand and gave him a lump.

Just as he reached down for the other one, Robin felt Mrs. McGraw tug her sleeve. "Best be going, my lass," she said. Robin looked up and saw on the step by the door a barefooted girl who sat hugging her knees and staring at her. The girl sighed when she looked at Robin and shook her head. "To give white sugar to a foolish donkey!" Robin heard her murmur. "And I who own him must sit with watering mouth."

Robin ignored a second "Best be going, my lass." Although these Sicilians spoke in a queer dialect, she could usually tell what they meant. Robin opened up her other hand and said in polite Italian, "If you please, *Signorina.* It is but a little damp."

The girl ran down the steps and popped the lump into her mouth just as the donkey reached for it. "All donkey spit as it was!" but Mrs. McGraw's shocked voice was sharply interrupted.

The small donkey lifted his head and hee-hawed until the narrow walls rang.

"One would think, Tito, that you had been run over by a tourist charabanc," the girl crunched her sugar, "when all that is asked of you is that you share your good fortune with the one who feeds and shelters you. Shame!"

Tito bawled a final hee-haw and started up the steps. The girl seized him by the neck, and taking the last sticky grains from her mouth, offered them to the donkey who licked them from her hand. "But see, I am not so selfish as you. You do not hear me scream now, do you?" Tito remained quiet under the arm thrown about his neck, and the girl turned her attention to Robin. *"Bella animala,"* she said in tones of complete satisfaction with her Tito, "but come to the square to-morrow afternoon and you shall ride him there for three *liras*."

"Now it is time that we *are* going," announced Mrs. McGraw. "I've listened long enough to this gibberish."

Robin seized upon this last moment as Tito had reached for the crumbs of sugar. "Mrs. McGraw!" she begged. "If you please, Mrs. McGraw, will you let me ride Tito in the square to-morrow afternoon?"

"And bring home fleas to hop from every corner of my clean house! That I will not!" Mrs. McGraw sounded as if her mind was made up.

"Why not?" asked the girl of Robin, lifting an eyebrow toward Mrs. McGraw.

"Fleas," said Robin.

"So?" The girl ran an exploring finger through Tito's soft gray coat. Mrs. McGraw shuddered. "And if a flea, what then?"

Robin turned away downcast. She might have known that Mrs. McGraw would find some good reason why she could not ride the small donkey. "All right, we'll go now," she said in a hopeless little voice. "I wish I could go home to America where I could have some fun."

Mrs. McGraw loosed her hold on the sleeve. "Dear knows what a woman is to do!" she cried. "Here she's wishing to run home with lonesomeness, and there's nothing to offer her but a flea-ridden donkey!" She looked distractedly up at the owner who lounged against the wall and watched her with a wicked glint in her black eyes. The girl seemed poor with her faded dress and her bare brown legs. "Tell her," Mrs. McGraw seized Robin's sleeve again, "tell her that we will buy her mouse of a donkey. I have three kinds of flea powder at the villa."

Robin whirled back, her eyes searching the woman's face. Buy Tito? The small, soft Tito with his cool nose and wise eyes? Buy Tito? Mrs. McGraw could not mean it. But she nudged Robin. "Go on," she demanded, "say it in her own heathen tongue."

Robin stuttered so that the girl could hardly understand her. When she finally got the meaning she laughed.

"Tell her," said Mrs. McGraw, believing that the girl was delighted with the idea, "tell her that so small a donkey is worth but little. Almost nothing. Tell her that. She will try to make us pay too high."

But Robin had drooped again. "No," she said, in the same dreary little voice. "No, she won't. She says she wouldn't sell Tito for a million American dollars."

Mrs. McGraw looked dumbfounded. "She wouldn't, eh? And if I should offer her one, she'd take it fast enough."

But Mrs. McGraw was mistaken. The girl paid no attention to the small package of *lire* notes which she held out. Robin felt pretty sure that she was laughing at them for trying to get Tito, and she edged away toward the street. But Mrs. McGraw had her Scotch spirit of barter up.

"We'll get the donkey yet, my lass," she promised.

"The trouble is," Robin explained to her, "that Tito earns their living for her and her mother. He works every day and the money that we paid would soon be gone with no one else to earn more."

Mrs. McGraw thought a moment. "And what can a bit of a creature like that earn?" She looked at the small Tito skeptically. "A poor living they'd get with no one but him to bring it in! Five *liras* a day, she says? Well, now, let's see. Tell her I'll give her thirty *liras* a week, sure money, if she will bring that donkey around to the villa each day, and sprinkle flea powder on it herself."

The girl considered. Apparently the five *liras* a day were not sure money. Yet she, too, hated to give up her bargaining. "With plenty of grass for Tito?"

"All the grass on the place, provided he picks his own," agreed Mrs. McGraw. "It will save having it cut."

The bargain was finished. Robin felt little ripples of happiness crawling up her back. Tito, each day, at her own house! Tito! And maybe this funny girl, too, though she wouldn't say any-

thing about that to Mrs. McGraw yet. One thing at a time!

"Ask her what her name is." Mrs. McGraw seemed to feel that without a name the bargain was not clinched.

"Bianca," reported Robin.

"Bee what? Bee Anchor? Now where's the sense in a name like that? Well, you tell that Bee girl to be round at Villa Serena at nine o'clock to-morrow morning. She will find the box of flea powder just inside the gate. Now come along or your porridge will be ruined." Mrs. McGraw turned down the street toward home.

No visit to the volcano to-night. But Robin did not care. She waved to Bianca and Tito who stood together staring after her. Neither paid any attention to her, but they both whirled around together, climbed the steps, and Robin saw them both go into the door. She nodded her head. "Sleeps in the house! Just what I thought," she said.

"I should hope so," grumbled Mrs. McGraw, hurrying on ahead. "Even a heathen girl would not sleep outdoors."

Robin said nothing. To-morrow was too precious to risk any shock to Mrs. McGraw. To-morrow the little gray Tito would be walking in

this very gate. All covered with flea powder? Not if Robin had understood that look in Bianca's eyes! To-morrow she could ride him up and down the garden paths, even up the stone steps, for wasn't he used to climbing stairs? To-morrow he could eat the fresh green grass that grew on their own hillside. Perhaps she might be able to persuade Mrs. McGraw to let her pick one small head of lettuce from the kitchen garden for Tito. She was a little doubtful about this idea. Mrs. McGraw had had a hard time to raise those vegetables without a gardener to help her. But she declared that she would have no one on the place who could not understand what she said; it would be easier to do the work herself.

Oh, well, it didn't matter. Nothing mattered now that Tito was really coming. Robin ate her half-cold porridge and went to bed without even a look out into the garden where the nightingales were just tuning up with experimental whistles. She went to sleep at once, too, and dreamed that a small gray donkey had climbed up the vine outside her window and looked in at her with wise eyes. She half woke to see his ears flapping in the pale light at the window. No, it was the curtain. She slept again, quietly.

CHAPTER II

A WEARING GUEST

ROBIN was at the gates next morning long before nine o'clock. Mrs. McGraw unlocked them for her and told her to stay inside. "Dear knows what might get you out there." She cast a dour look down the sunshiny road.

"If only something would!" Robin thought. Those gates had shut her in ever since father and mother had left, and beyond them were all sorts of interesting things. She knew because they used to wander off with the picnic basket almost every day. Father liked to talk with a peasant plowing a field, and they would laugh together, and by and by father would draw his picture. They liked father, and Robin picked up a good many Sicilian words listening to them talk together. Mother said that her Scotch burr would never let her tongue manage such words, but that Robin was like her father, even to her long fingers for drawing; though fingers weren't much good without eyes.

It had all seemed very beautiful when father was here to see it with her and when they could make sketches together. The shadows racing over the sea and blotting its blue into gray and green where they fell; not a shadow had fallen on its glare since he had left. She tried to draw everything he did, and when she looked at his sketch she found out things about her own. They would sit on a rock together while he pointed out this and that in her drawing. It was fun, better than America, or school, or anything else. As father said, though, the things he picked out were pretty hard for a beginner; she had better find something of her own. But since he had gone to Scotland she had not touched a pencil. There was nothing she wanted to draw.

Robin waited until Mrs. McGraw had gone back to her kitchen garden to do her weeding before the sun got too hot. Then she climbed the gate post by its hinges and cracks until she could seat herself on its flat top. Mrs. McGraw would think she might fall, so there was no use worrying her.

Robin sniffed at the sweet air. It was nice up there on the post. Behind her the road wound among the lemon groves up the mountain, Sola, that she wanted so much to climb. Mrs. McGraw

said that it was too dangerous for the young and too hard work for the old. Who, then, was to climb it?

Away down the road Robin could see a faint cloud of dust moving slowly up the hill. So slowly! She tried turning and watching Sola while she counted twenty in Italian, then twisting suddenly about to see if she could tell yet who it was. The cloud disappeared around a bend in the road and when it came out Tito was plainly in sight with Bianca strolling beside him and waving a leafy switch to keep off the flies. When she could hear Bianca singing, a strange sliding song which seemed to have no tune, Robin slipped easily from her post. Shorts were good for climbing. Mrs. McGraw would not let her run down the road, so she ran back and forth in the driveway like a little dog who can no longer wait for his master to start.

"*Mà!* What have you?" Bianca leaned on Tito's back and watched Robin. "A fit? You must indeed be mad to run in circles on a morning of such heat. Do not bite my donkey, small boy."

Robin had not expected Bianca to appear so soon, nor did she like to be called a small boy. She stalked angrily up to Tito and seized his

rope halter. "And you?" she said. "Do you think you are so much older?"

"*Si,*" said Bianca, "yes, don't you?"

Robin would not look into the impudent black eyes laughing at her. She pulled at Tito with a brief *addio* in Bianca's direction. But she did not get far. At the end of Tito's halter she was pulled up short. The small donkey had his four hoofs firmly planted in the dust. Bianca leaned against the post and watched them gravely. Robin did not look at her. Still holding the rope, she reached into her pocket and held out the lump of sugar which she had saved from breakfast. Tito came willingly for the sugar, and Robin cast a triumphant glance in Bianca's direction. She twitched the rope and started off again, but at the end of it she stopped as suddenly as before. Tito stood perfectly still, staring mildly at the trees. Robin heard a faint chuckle from Bianca at the gate.

"Weel, and now what is it?" For once Robin was glad to hear Mrs. McGraw's Scotch voice. "Will the wee mouse of a donkey not move for you?" She reached for the rope, the big garden gloves on her hands looking as if they could easily carry the donkey.

But Tito had no mind to move. Mrs. McGraw

looked surprised and pulled with both hands. Tito leaned slightly back and rested on his weight. He did not appear even interested but still stared at the trees. Robin took hold of the rope with Mrs. McGraw and they pulled together. Mrs. McGraw got quite red but Tito did not move his small hoofs. Not until Mrs. McGraw tried to carry him; then they shot out so swiftly that the housekeeper jumped aside into a thicket and left Robin tugging alone at the rope. She would not let go, but she cast a beseeching glance toward the gate. If Bianca did not help her now, Mrs. McGraw would not let her keep Tito.

For the first time Mrs. McGraw saw Bianca leaning against the gate. "So you're there, my girl, are you?" The thicket had had briers and her voice was tart. "And why did you think I hired this creature for the lass? I may as well have bought her a small stone lion from your broken-down old ruins to play with. Will you fetch him in? Or won't you?"

"What did the old one say?" inquired Bianca, looking as if all this disturbance had nothing to do with her.

"She said would you please help bring the donkey in." Robin thought that it might be better

not to translate everything. She had forgotten her own anger in her fear at losing Tito. Her eyes implored Bianca.

The girl dug her bare toes into the dust. "Where do you wish him to go?"

Robin reached the rope toward her. "Into the garden, please," she said meekly.

The procession started. Mrs. McGraw walked ahead, well out of the way of Tito's heels. Bianca followed, leading Tito, who acted as if he wanted to go nowhere so much as into the garden. Robin walked beside the donkey, one hand on his soft gray coat. The palm burned from the scrape of the rope, but that was a small matter. At last things were right!

Suddenly Mrs. McGraw wheeled about. "And the flea powder?" she asked. "Did you put it on?"

Robin stood still. Bianca halted with an inquiring glance at her. Tito reached for a heliotrope blossom. In her anger Robin had forgotten the flea powder, and if Bianca had thought of it she had said nothing. Now what would happen!

"Oh, that!" said Bianca when Robin had explained. "I have removed every flea to the last one before I slept." She pinched her forefinger with her thumb nail. "Ask the old one to look if she does not believe."

To Robin's relief Mrs. McGraw sniffed and went on. Her vegetable garden was not yet weeded and the sun was getting high. "The girl can go home now, and tell her to be back for the creature at five o'clock sharp."

Bianca tied the donkey's halter to an olive tree by the garden wall and strolled away. "Give him grass at noon," she directed over her shoulder at Robin as she left. "And fresh water. I'll be here early."

Tito and Robin watched her go; Tito with the same mild stare that he had turned on the trees when she pulled him, Robin a little uneasy about the stare but glad on the whole that she was to have Tito to herself. For a while she sat under the olive tree and rested in its cool gray-green shade. Tito appeared to like resting very much. He was too small to see over the wall, but he seemed perfectly content to stand on three legs and stare at the tree.

Robin liked the garden, too, this morning. Its stillness did not seem lonely with Tito standing companionably beside her. Through half-shut eyes she noted idly the curve of his neck and his little straight legs. He stands as still as a model, she thought. Then she sat up and looked at him more sharply. "Well, why not?" she said, aloud.

She dove into the capacious pocket made especially for her sketch pad. In the green shade the only spot of color was the bright head bent over the pad, absorbed in capturing the donkey's pose. The only motion the lift and drop of the head and the steady scrawl of the pencil.

As Robin drew she chuckled with satisfaction. "There you are," she held the sketch out for Tito to see, "I shall call it *Donkey Siesta*, and it shows exactly how lazy you are." And Robin was right; she had managed to catch the slouch of the half-asleep donkey. "Father wouldn't draw anything so silly," she crammed the pad back into her pocket, "but maybe I'll show it to him."

Tito had roused himself enough to nip off a mouthful of freesia blossoms which stuck out of his mouth, cream-colored, fragrant. Robin thought that he was holding them there under his nose where he might smell of them. But suddenly they disappeared and he was reaching for more. The whole lovely border seemed about to go for Tito's breakfast. Robin felt that this would never do. She pulled herself up by the rope and jerked him away from the flowers.

Tito looked around at her reproachfully. She still held him away from the border firmly. He stretched his neck as if to make a clear course for

the sound, and then hee-haw, hee-haw, aw-aw-aw, up and down, until Robin at the other end of the halter felt numb with the roar.

"A mouse did I call him?" Mrs. McGraw came running from the kitchen garden. "It's no squeak he has but the howl of a hyena. What ails the creature?"

"I think he's had no breakfast," explained Robin hastily. "Would you be willing to let him have a small lettuce?"

"Give a donkey the lettuce that I raised with my own hands?" Mrs. McGraw stared at Robin, scandalized. "Give the donkey my lettuce!"

But Tito had already taken the matter into his own hands. Jerking the rope out of Robin's hands, he stalked toward the open door of the vegetable garden. Some delicate whiff of lettuce leaves must have come to his nostrils. For an instant Robin stood paralyzed, then she darted swiftly around in front of him and slammed the door on his investigating nose.

"I'll pick him some clover at once," she promised Mrs. McGraw who was bearing down on them. "I know where there is a patch. Come, Tito!"

Again Tito started to hee-haw. In desperation Robin broke a switch from a flowering bush and

whisked him on the legs. To her amazement he dropped his head and trotted along behind her as if he had never wanted to do anything else.

"You see," Robin called back to Mrs. McGraw who watched them speechless, "you see I am learning to manage him."

"What I see," said Mrs. McGraw, "is that you have a lot to learn."

"Well," said Robin, tugging Tito down the path, "that was a narrow escape! You let Mrs. McGraw's vegetables alone."

Tito looked at her with wise brown eyes and said nothing.

The sun was hot and Tito held back more and more. Robin eyed his gay little saddle with its scarlet pompom in front. If he wore a saddle he must be meant to ride. "I never climbed up on a donkey," thought Robin, "but he is so little I think I could manage."

She had seen those heels fly out at Mrs. McGraw and she had no mind to get in their way. She thought very hard for a few minutes, and then she led Tito under a small stone pine which she often climbed.

"Now you stand still, right here." She placed Tito exactly under the lowest branch. He seemed so anxious to stand still that Robin was sure he

would not move. She laid the rope beside him and climbed the tree while Tito stared at the trunk. When she had crawled out on the branch directly over the saddle she dropped down on to Tito's back.

But Tito had never been mounted from above. He gave one astonished leap and fled down the path, his small hoofs clattering. Robin threw both arms around his neck. "If I can only hold on," she thought, "he can't run far. And he'll smash me if I fall off!"

Sure enough, Tito could not run far because he soon came to the garden wall. But instead of slowing up when he saw it, he raced full speed at it and then stopped short with all four feet bunched together. Robin, of course, went right over his head into the largest heliotrope bush in the garden. "But if it hadn't been here, I'd have had an awful bump from the wall." She picked herself up and threw some broken branches over the edge. "I'll tell Mrs. McGraw that. Really Tito saved my life." She eyed the donkey who looked as if he would never move again. "But I guess I won't mount him that way next time. Maybe I should have asked Bianca more about him."

Robin felt very much shaken up. Her legs

trembled and her throat was so dry that she could scarcely swallow. But not for the world would she let Tito know. She dusted off a skinned knee, and picked another switch. "If I don't mount him now, I'll never mount him" she thought, "I'll be too scared."

She showed the switch to Tito. "Now you march yourself up to this stone," she said fiercely, though her voice shook like her legs. Tito walked gently over to the big stone with her. Robin climbed on the stone and put one foot in the stirrup. Tito did not move. Now what? In some way she must hoist herself into the saddle. She gave a jump and there she sat, but both feet were on the same side of the saddle, which was no way to ride. Slowly she raised one leg, up over Tito's neck, down the other side, and there it was planted in the other stirrup. And Tito had not stirred.

"Get up!" commanded Robin, her bare legs hugging the donkey's warm sides. Tito did not move. She remembered that he was Italian. "*Avante,* Tito!" she said, and touched him with the switch. Tito moved gravely down the garden path. Robin sat straight and looked about her at the flowers and trees as they marched past. She felt as if nothing could shake her off now. It

was no longer difficult to swallow; she was even able to whistle easily. Tito was a good donkey when you knew how to manage him.

When lunch time came Robin was not unwilling to tie Tito in the shade while she had the *siesta* she usually disliked. It was hard work to entertain a donkey. Robin wondered how Bianca managed to look so carefree. But of course she made Tito work for her and that was different. She fell asleep trying to think of some little job she could get Tito around the place.

When she woke she found that Tito had not waited for her to find him a job. He had apparently gone off to find one for himself. The frayed end of the rope dangled from the tree trunk, but Tito was not in sight. Robin decided that it would be better not to say anything to Mrs. McGraw just yet. She was stirring about the kitchen getting tea. Anyway, until she had her tea, Robin never spoke to her of unpleasant subjects. She slipped down the steps past the kitchen entrance into the garden. No Tito. Just the hot, quiet fragrance of the afternoon in the empty garden.

Where could he go! Where could he go! The gate was closed. He could not climb the walls. What would Bianca do to her if she had lost Tito? Suddenly a thought struck her that made

her tremble as she had not done when Tito threw her over his head. The vegetable garden! Could he have found his way back to the lettuce which his stubborn little head had not forgotten?

Robin fled down the path, faster, faster. Almost better that Tito should be lost than that he should be found in Mrs. McGraw's vegetable garden. The garden door, would it be open? She could see it now. It swung wide on its hinges. Robin's panic-stricken legs gave out and she sank down beside it, peering around the corner on all fours. He was there! The wicked Tito! All full of the juicy clover that she had picked for him in the broiling sun! How could he!

And what was he eating now? Perhaps because he felt that he had had enough greens, Tito had passed through the lettuce bed, uprooting a few plants with his hoofs, and was now busily pulling up carrots by their tops which he bit off while he chewed with relish the juicy red end. Robin had a fleeting thought that she wished he would eat them all so that she would not have to, but she dismissed it with horror. Mrs. McGraw's carrots went into almost everything she cooked. She must save them!

She remembered how impossible it was to move Tito when he made up his mind to stay where he

was. And he was having too good a time now to wish to go anywhere else in the world. She felt frantically in her pockets. One small lump of sugar. Still crawling on her hands and knees in order not to startle him, she held out the sugar.

"Psssst, Tito! Psssst!" she hissed.

Tito bit off another carrot top and tossed it away. One row was almost gone. If she could get hold of the short piece of rope which dangled its frayed end from Tito's neck, perhaps she could drag his head away from the vegetables until help came. Though her heart turned cold at the thought of calling Mrs. McGraw.

But as soon as Tito heard the soft scuffle of Robin's crawl, he kicked up his heels and moved on. The kick uprooted three young bean plants and brought Tito within reach of the new peas. She must call Mrs. McGraw. But what could *she* do? What could anybody do? Anybody except Bianca. Oh, if she knew how Bianca managed him!

As if to show her, Bianca suddenly appeared in the garden door. She cast one swift look at the damage, and without waiting for any explanation from Robin, snapped her fingers and said something to Tito in Sicilian dialect. It worked like magic. The little donkey walked straight over to

the girl and stood meekly beside her listening to the terrible things which Bianca was evidently telling him about himself. Now and then his jaws moved a little as if they were remembering how the carrot tasted.

Bianca turned to Robin who sat back on her heels watching them. "It's not so bad," she said reassuringly, "I will soon set straight again the misdoings of this wicked Tito." She made another uncomplimentary remark to the donkey who nodded where she tied him. "Get up from your knees, small boy, and come help me."

Deftly Bianca set the uprooted beans back in their places. Robin smoothed the soft dirt over the imprints of Tito's hoofs. "To-morrow from my own garden I will bring plants to fill these empty places where the wicked Tito has eaten," promised Bianca. *"Mà!* They will be far better plants than these small and ill-nourished weeds!"

"But *now!*" Robin still looked stricken. "What shall we tell Mrs. McGraw now?"

She had to decide at once because Mrs. McGraw walked into the garden. She looked at the donkey tied peaceably in the corner, at the girl apparently employed in digging up her carrots, and at Robin who, if she was not helping her, at least was not preventing her. Robin had never

seen Mrs. McGraw look really angry before. Always she knew that under the sharpness there had been a twinkle. But now there was no twinkle anywhere.

"Out with her," she said, "out with them both. And you walk into the house, my lass, and straight to bed. Wait a minute," she took her purse from her pocket, "give her her money and tell her I'm through with her."

But Bianca needed no translation. She lifted her head and looked at Mrs. McGraw with proud black eyes. "Tell the old one," she said to Robin, "that I take her money because she has made me waste a whole day of work. Tell her that I was not coming back anyway; that I would rather have my Tito working with me than to sit around waiting for him. That is why I came early for him. And tell her, too, that her whole miserable garden is not worth a flip of my Tito's ears."

She swept the garden with a glance of scorn that was evident even to its owner, and with her arm about the small Tito's neck, stalked through the gate.

"Well, now, what did the impudent creature say?" Into Mrs. McGraw's exasperation had crept a note of uneasiness. "Does she threaten us, the heathen?"

"No," said Robin, in a small, weary voice, "she just wasn't coming back with Tito anyway." She began to climb the steps to the house.

Mrs. McGraw bristled. "Oh, she wasn't, eh? Well, it's good she wasn't disappointed." Then she softened as she watched Robin's discouraged back. "You'd best have your supper before you go to bed."

Robin did not turn. "No, thank you," she said, "I don't feel hungry."

Up the stairs to her room and into her big cool bed. Robin was very tired, so tired that she was sure that she would never be happy again. Mrs. McGraw would always think that she and Bianca had ruined her garden when she had let her have the donkey. Bianca was furious, and anyway she would not have let Tito come again. It must be nice to have some work that you could do all day with a donkey to help you! And Tito, the cause of all the trouble, what was Tito doing now? Standing on the stone stairs waiting to go into the house for the night. Robin knew just how he looked with his wise, dark eyes staring down into the crooked street. Probably Mrs. McGraw wouldn't even let her give him lumps of sugar now. Probably she wouldn't walk down toward the end of the village where they could

see the volcano. Six days her father and mother had been gone. Not a week yet. And then it would be four times as long before they came back. Robin's imagination could not stretch over all that time spent sitting alone in the garden with no Tito. He was so funny and stubborn! And she had been learning to manage him so well. Oh, goodness, how lonesome she was!

Robin turned her head into her pillow so that she might not hear the nightingales, and after a while she slept. All night Tito walked about in her dreams. She thought that she had found a job for the little donkey and they were working together. But all that Tito would do was to root up plants which she had to put back in the ground very quickly. And Tito *would* whistle like a nightingale until she could bear it no longer and screamed at him. She screamed a good many times, and every now and then she seemed to realize that Mrs. McGraw was in the room trying to stop her.

SCHOOLS
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CHAPTER III

TITO'S JOB

IN the morning Robin was pale and quiet. Although she had had no supper she scarcely touched her breakfast. Mrs. McGraw watched her anxiously. "Wake up, my lass, and walk out with me while I unlock the gates. 'Twill do you good."

Robin trailed along behind her. Yesterday she was running out to meet Tito, and now Tito was off working with Bianca and they were having

fun together. She saw Mrs. McGraw lean down and pick up the cans of flea powder. Then as she threw back the gates, she leaned over again and looked at something just outside. Robin was not interested.

"Come here, my lass," she called. "What do you make of this?"

Robin peered out. Just outside the closed gate some one had placed a box and over it had carefully rigged a newspaper tent to protect it from the sun.

"What's under there?" Mrs. McGraw stood well away from the box. "It might well be a bomb in this heathen country. Come away, Robin!" she cried, for Robin had lifted a corner of the paper. "Well, now, where did those fine young plants come from?" Mrs. McGraw, who was a farmer through and through, was on her knees beside the box of fresh green vegetables. They were packed in rich black loam and looked as if they were growing sturdily even as they waited by the gate.

Robin picked up a small scrap of paper thrust into the loam. She could read very little Italian though she spoke it well. But the message was so short that she managed to make it out. "To the old one," it said in scrawly letters. She looked

doubtfully into Mrs. McGraw's curious eyes. "It is a present to you from Bianca," she explained.

Mrs. McGraw stiffened. "And whose garden do you suppose she pulled these fine plants from?"

Could she explain to her? Robin felt sometimes that it was harder to make things clear to Mrs. McGraw than if she spoke a foreign language. "I think she brought them out of her own garden." She looked up at her and spoke slowly. "She was not pulling up your carrots. She was trying to put back the plants that Tito had torn up. Tito ate the carrots that are gone." It was hard to blame the little Tito, but after all he would not mind and Bianca did mind very much.

Mrs. McGraw set the flea-powder cans down and picked up the box. "So that was it," she said. "Well, why not have said so last night?" She did not wait for an answer but hurried off to the garden with her big box.

Robin followed her. There was nothing else to do. And Mrs. McGraw no longer looked cross. "Run get the pile of *Edinburgh News* that is stacked in the kitchen," she told her. "You could make the little tents to keep them from the sun."

Over each plant Robin rigged a tent as fast as Mrs. McGraw set it in the earth. "What these

may be I do not know," she said, "they are like no plants that ever grew in Scotland, and they are most likely no good at all. But I could not waste them. They've far too rich soil," she grumbled, and Robin noticed how black the earth looked beside the holes she put them in. "And how can I cook them without knowing what they are?"

The tents finished, the day stretched on, endless. Robin moped about the garden and stared out over the wall at the blue sea. She untied the broken end of Tito's rope and threw it over the wall. Where would Mrs. McGraw take her for a walk to-day? She was sure that they would not go past Tito's steps or down to look at the volcano. She wished that Mrs. McGraw felt a little younger so that she would want to climb Sola. She would like to get nearer to that old castle on the top and see what it was like. Father was going to paint a picture of it when he came back and he had promised to take Robin along with him. She would draw it, too; a castle like that was worth drawing. Well, there was nothing to do but wait for four weeks more. No Tito now, nothing to draw, nothing at all to do but wait!

At noon Robin ate very little lunch though Mrs. McGraw urged the good carrot stew upon

her because it was full of iron and she needed iron to make her strong. She was getting thinner every day, and what would her mother say when she came back? Robin said nothing, but she did not eat the carrot stew.

The afternoon dragged on. After her siesta they walked down to the village where Mrs. McGraw bought some darning cotton. But it was no fun talking about darning cotton, so they went along in silence. Then there was a porridge supper and bed.

"I'm hoping that you sleep better to-night." Mrs. McGraw looked worried. "You've had nothing to excite you to-day. You should sleep well."

Robin thought of the long dull day. "I should like a little excitement," she said wistfully.

"Tut, tut!" returned Mrs. McGraw. But she shook her head and looked more worried than ever.

When Robin woke, the cool, clear dawn was creeping over Sola. She lay and watched the mountain top turn gold in the sun. Then the light slipped down the mountain side, and the castle began to glow as if it shone through the walls.

Robin sat up suddenly and reached for her clothes. "I think I'll climb Sola," she decided. "I'm tired of this place. And I'd like to show

father a sketch of something good, like that castle."

She remembered what had happened before when she had decided to go away. This time she would be more careful. Carrying her sandals in her hand she crept down the great staircase. Through the open doors the rooms looked shadowy and full of dark, unfriendly corners. She hurried by them, catching their close, musty smell. The outer door was locked and Robin dared not go down through the kitchen entrance. She struggled with the enormous iron key and finally it creaked around in the keyhole. Out into the morning! The air was like a drink of fresh, cool water! She closed the door upon the darkness of the house, and stretched her arms up toward the sunshine. No danger of Mrs. McGraw seeing her from this side of the villa.

Robin pulled on her sandals and ran down the driveway. No use to try the gates. They would be locked, and the drop from the post to the road was too far. But she knew where the wall had broken down behind some tall rose vines. The grass was wet with dew as she ran through it, and not a leaf moved in the quiet. The morning breeze had not swept down the mountain yet and the garden looked half-asleep. Robin could

see the faint mist of dew on the rose petals as she clambered up the wall. Even their fragrance seemed heavier and sweeter than when the sun shone on them. Robin wished that she had known before how nice the early morning could be.

She clung by her hands to the rough edge of the wall, and then dropped into the dusty grass of the roadside. She was off! Already the light and cloud shadows were running over the side of the mountain. Just as father had seen them running over the sea. And they changed the color of the land under them, too. She stood still a moment and watched the violet patches move swiftly over the meadows.

To-day was cool and fresh, just the kind of day for anything to run. Straight ahead of her stretched Sola. Robin felt as if she could run all the way. But the road grew steeper as she went along until she finally settled down into a steady walk.

The dust was thick and the walls on each side of the road kept away the cool breeze which had sprung up, so that when Robin saw a well-trodden mule track leading off through the fields and woods straight up toward the castle, she turned into it.

"Even if it goes nowhere, it is cool and shady,"

she thought, "and I can always come back on it to the road if I wish."

The fresh wind blowing down the mountain could reach her now and it cooled her like a sea bath. It had begun to blow the almond blossoms from the trees and the pink petals floated past her and made a rosy path ahead of her. The grass was so green that Robin wanted to lie down in it and listen to larks flying out of it. But she must get on. Past the small squares of gardens which clung like striped patches to the hillside. Robin was beginning to feel tired and very empty. Suddenly she remembered that she had had no breakfast. Yet she did not regret the porridge and boiled egg. A little farther along she might come upon an orange grove with a not too green orange on the ground.

She flung herself down under an almond tree and watched the lovely pale flowers move against the dark blue sky. If father would teach her about colors, she would never let anything so beautiful get away from her. She would—suddenly she was roused by a familiar sound. Hee-haw! Hee-haw! Aw-aw-aw! But of course all donkeys brayed alike. It could not be Tito.

She peered across the field at the small garden patch where the noise came from. Some one, a

girl, was bending over, and tied to a stake was a small gray donkey. Could it possibly be! Could it! Robin raced across the field calling ooh-hoo, ooh-hoo!

The girl straightened up and leaned against a bean pole. The small donkey lowered his upstretched neck and bit off a bray in the middle. It was! It was! Bianca and Tito hard at work on their job. Robin fairly wanted to hee-haw herself!

Bianca's black eyes widened with amazement as she approached. "But you!" she cried. "You *piccolo!* The small boy so far away by himself! What does this mean?"

Robin was too happy to mind even the small boy. "I am climbing Sola," she explained, "and you? Is this the place where you and Tito work?"

"Here and elsewhere," responded Bianca tersely. "When we have grown our vegetables, we sell them. But where is the old one? How did it come about that she let you go off alone?"

"I didn't ask her," said Robin hastily. It was no use wasting time talking about such things. Here were Bianca and Tito and all their work to find out about. Why talk about Mrs. McGraw?

Bianca laughed. Her eyes and teeth gleamed at Robin who laughed with her. They understood

each other without words. "I, too, climb Sola this morning," she said. "As soon as I have loaded Tito with to-day's fresh vegetables, we shall climb to the village of Sola to sell them."

Robin dropped the castle out of her plans. It could wait. It belonged to father anyway. But to go with Bianca and Tito, and maybe sell vegetables! Bianca looked good-natured this morning; she had perhaps forgotten her anger. How could she persuade her?

"If I help," she suggested, "may I come with you?"

Again Bianca laughed. "You! What could you do?"

Robin thought. "Pick peas."

Bianca shook her head and bent down again to the green stalks which she was cutting and tying into bunches for Tito's saddle. "The peas are new," she said. "You could not tell which ones were ready to be picked."

Robin tried again. The only vegetables that she was sure of were carrots and she saw nothing which looked like their feathery tops. But this green patch by the wall—"Oh, I know these!" she cried. "These are the vegetables that you left at our gate!"

Bianca's face changed. "Well, and the old one?

Did she like them? Did she think them as good as the small red lumps my Tito ate?"

Robin laughed. The day and all this good luck made her feel as gay as the larks soaring over her head. "They are much the nicest things in her garden, much! I will pull weeds," she announced.

"And new young plants at the same time. *No di certo!*" Bianca glowered over her bunch of greens at Robin whose gold head was cocked on one side like an ingratiating puppy. *"Bene,"* she yielded, "this you may do. Break a switch of leaves and keep the flies away from my Tito while I load my baskets. He jumps like a rabbit when a horse fly approaches him."

In spite of Robin's efforts—and she felt that she knew a good deal about a switch now—Tito jumped like a rabbit twice. Bianca slapped him across the flank. "There was no fly," she said. "He likes the morning."

Robin liked it, too. She forgot that she had begun to feel tired, and when the donkey, loaded like a small walking garden, moved up the mountain side, Robin marched beside him, waving her switch. Bianca led the way, halter in hand. She had said nothing more to her helper about coming so that Robin decided that it would be better

not to mention it. She kept the switch so busy that finally Tito reached around and bit the top off it. Bianca saw him do it.

"Let him use his own tail now that I am ahead of him," she said. "We will walk together."

Robin tossed the switch away. It was settled. She was to climb Sola with Bianca and Tito!

Up and up they climbed, Bianca's steady stride never slackening. When Tito dragged behind to reach a fresh thistle, Bianca jerked him back into his plodding march. "When your back is empty, you may fill your stomach. The sun is getting high." She was singing as she walked along, the strange sliding song that seemed to have no tune.

Robin sang with her for a while but she found that she needed all of her breath for climbing. The sun was indeed getting high, and though the mountain air felt cool and fresh, Robin was finding it harder and harder to keep up with the little procession. She had seen no oranges for a breakfast and she was sure now that they were too high for the groves.

The path grew stony and narrow as it skirted a steep edge of the mountain. Bianca evidently knew a short cut to the village which was off the trodden mule track. It made Robin a trifle dizzy to walk so near the edge of the steep drop. She

shifted behind Tito and kept her eyes on his sturdy legs picking their way over the rolling stones as surely as he had walked down the steps by his house. Now and then Bianca would call over her shoulder, "Courage, *Piccolo! Avante,* Tito!" and on they would stride.

It was one of the rolling stones that finally halted the procession. But not because Tito had stumbled over it. Robin's legs, unsteady now with hunger and weariness, failed to steer her aside quickly enough, and she fell, grasping at the thickets which edged the path. Bianca heard the crash and with one swift movement had darted behind Tito and pulled her well back on to the path. There she sat and stared dizzily out over the edge.

"Enough!" cried Bianca. "Look up the mountain, not down it! Would you fall again?"

But though her voice was sharp, her eyes were concerned. "You are pale," she said, "you are tired. What if it is early? We will stop under the tree at the next curve for our *colazione. Avante!* A few steps more!"

When they reached the next curve Robin was glad to sit down. She rubbed her ankle stealthily. "It will be all right when I have rested a few minutes," she thought.

Bianca tied the donkey to the tree and lifted from her saddle a pail and a newspaper-wrapped package. Robin watched her hungrily. What was she to do? In her hasty departure she had not thought of lunch, and she could not take Bianca's when she had brought only enough for herself. Bianca took the cover from the pail and Robin got a savory whiff of macaroni and tomato. On the newspaper Bianca laid a long crusty end of a loaf and a creamy cheese. *"Bel Paese,"* she said, "I like that kind."

Just then she looked up and caught Robin's devouring stare which she turned away, embarrassed. Into the cover of the pail Bianca emptied long slippery coils of macaroni red with tomato. She broke the crust in two and held it out to Robin. "With the one you can eat the other," she said, and showed her by scooping up the macaroni with the hard crusts.

Robin did not wait for further directions. In the pail was still as much macaroni as one person could hold. Bending low over her cover so that she would not lose one of the slippery pieces, she scooped until it was empty. Then watching Bianca, she polished off the tomato sauce with a soft piece of the inside of the loaf. Now the cheese. *Bel Paese!* Could she ever persuade Mrs.

McGraw to get that kind! With the rest of her crust she ate the smooth cheese to the last crumb. Oh, what a lunch! Did Bianca live on such delicious food all the time? No wonder she could laugh and work and manage Tito and climb a mountain without losing her breath!

But now Bianca kept looking at Robin as she fastened the empty pail to the saddle. "The foot," she said, "step on it and we shall see."

"She sees everything!" thought Robin. She rose briskly. Her lunch and the rest had made her all over new. "It was just a little twist. It is all right now." And it was, nearly.

Bianca bent over the foot and pressed her thumb into a little swollen place. Robin drew the foot back. "It hurts," Bianca said.

"Not much," Robin wished she had not flinched.

"No," said Bianca, "it is only a slight twist. But the rest of the climb is the hardest. It is a thousand pities, but you could not make it in time for me to sell my vegetables before dark."

Robin dropped on to a rock beside the path. All the gayety of the morning was snuffed out. She must sit here alone and wait while Bianca and Tito sold their vegetables in the little village that she had wanted so much to see. To come so

near to sharing their job, and then to be left out! Her eyes grew wide and dark in their effort to keep the tears back. For she could not delay Bianca who had let her come with them. *"Bene,"* she gulped.

Bianca was kind. "You will stay here," she decided, "Tito and I will be gone but a short time. When we return the saddle will be empty. You can ride down the mountain on Tito's back." She slapped the donkey across the flank. *"Avante,* Tito!" she cried, and the two started up the mountain side. She turned back, lifting one finger, then two. "Two hours," she called, "and we will be here again. It is the time for what you call your siesta. Sleep!" and there was a gleam of eyes and teeth as she turned back.

But Robin had no answering smile. Sleep! With her whole day held up by one careless step. She sat still on her rock, her cheeks cupped in her hands, and stared out over the valley beneath her. But what a morning she had already had! No one could take the morning away from her. And Bianca was no longer angry. There was the ride home, too, on Tito's back. It was all a thousand times better, even with the ankle, than the villa garden. She felt a little uneasy when she thought of the villa with Mrs. McGraw hunting through

the garden for her. But never having lost anybody herself, she did not worry long about how Mrs. McGraw would feel. "She can do what she wants to-day without having to bother about me," she thought, "and I'm sure she'll like that. Though she will probably scold when she sees me." She sighed at the thought of the scolding, and dismissed Mrs. McGraw from her mind.

The ankle did not hurt enough to keep her from hobbling around the next curve where suddenly the castle loomed above her. "I might as well draw it," she thought, "since that is what I really came for." She pulled out her sketch pad from her big pocket and eyed the castle. What a lot of parts there were to it! A broken-down tower here, a crumbled wall there. And it was so high above her that her neck got stiff leaning back to see it. She held the sketch at arms' length. "It looks like a train wreck," she decided. "Mother is right. I can never be an artist." And feeling very dejected, she curled up in a little ball by the path and fell asleep.

CHAPTER IV

BANDITTI

ROBIN was so tired by her long, hard walk since early dawn that she heard no sound of voices or steps approaching. Not until some one shook her did she open her eyes, muttering, "*Si, si,* Bianca. I'm coming. Wait one moment."

Then all sleep was startled out of her. She was looking up into the faces of two swarthy Sicilians. Their black eyebrows beetled over fierce black eyes. Their voices were guttural and harsh. Robin stumbled to her feet and stood backed against a tree, her fingers dug into its rough bark. Shaken out of her dreams by such rough hands left her bewildered as well as frightened. She did not try to scream, for she felt that she was in a nightmare in which she could make no sound.

She braced her trembling legs against the tree trunk and tried to shake off the hands which held her, but the hard fingers only dug farther into her shoulders. "What do you want?" she demanded, and was relieved to find that her voice could still work.

She stood there like a valiant small boy, with no sign of her fear except that her eyes were almost black in a face from which even the golden tan seemed drained. Only her hair ruffled bright against the dark tree trunk.

The men were evidently puzzled because Robin spoke Italian. They jabbered together, a strange dialect which she could not understand. She thought that it must be the speech of one of the mountain villages since she and Bianca could make each other understand. They pointed to her hair and eyes, and asked her a question. She guessed that they wanted to know something about who she was.

Should she tell them? Robin felt pretty sure by now that these men were some of the banditti of whom Mrs. McGraw had such a horror. It was because of them that she was afraid to let her go beyond the gates. "Money is what they want," she had said, "and they would carry off anybody for money." Robin had been interested in her stories much as she was interested in fairy stories. She liked to hear them without believing them. Well, it seemed they were true. Here were the bandits, and here she was, about to be carried off by them.

What else had Mrs. McGraw said? Something

about how they were especially anxious to get Americans because the Americans were all supposed to be rich. Perhaps then she had better not let them know that she was an American. There were blue-eyed Italians.

She pointed up the mountain side. "I am waiting for my friend, Bianca," she said in slow, careful Italian. "I have hurt my foot and cannot walk." She rubbed the ankle which had now swollen to considerable size.

The men peered cautiously up the deserted mountain side, spoke rapidly together a moment more, and then with no more ado the younger one seized Robin and packed her into the saddle of his mule as if she had been a sack of flour. He stood off and glowered at the small boy perched high on the big mule. Then he pulled some rope from behind the saddle and tied Robin securely to it. She could not slip down and get away now. She had hoped for just that chance when they got started. Now she was helpless.

The men walked rapidly down the path, their heads close together. Now and then they stopped talking long enough to turn around and eye her. Robin shuddered when they faced about again. Where were they taking her? Before they reached the rough path which Bianca had used as a short

cut from the trodden mule track the men turned sharply off on a path even narrower and rougher than the one they had traveled. It climbed again, and then dropped down into a small valley with steep sides darkened by thick woods. The path disappeared entirely here, and Robin had no idea how they finally reached the shack where the men took her. Even if they untied her and let her go free, she would not know how to get out of this enclosed hollow.

But they had no notion of letting her free. As they turned into the bare enclosure, the older man who walked by her mule faced her about and pointed up the mountain. Robin stared up at its forbidding rocks which beetled over them. The man jabbered something in his fierce, deep voice. He shook his long black hair violently and clutched at his throat. Robin crouched in her saddle and nodded faintly. "*Si, si,* I will stay here," she promised. It was a safe enough promise, she knew, since even if she could find her way out, she would never dare to elude any one who threatened such terrible things. Her lame foot would handicap her anyway, and she might as well wait until the men settled on some way to get a ransom for her.

But would they ever get a ransom? Robin

knew that Mrs. McGraw was so careful about money that she kept on hand only the amount which father sent her, just enough to buy their provisions from week to week. Even if the men found out who she was and where to go for the money, Mrs. McGraw would not have enough to satisfy them. And it would take so long before father could be reached! They would probably kill her before then. Mrs. McGraw had hinted that that was what they did when they could not get the money.

"I might have a better chance to get away," Robin thought, "if I didn't tell him who I am. Then they would take me back where they found me, and I could walk home easily from there. Oh, I don't know what to do! I don't know what to do! But I mustn't let them see that I am scared."

She tried to smile at the man who was untying her and lifting her from the saddle. But he was not looking at her. His eyes were on the door of the shack. Robin turned her head and saw standing in the doorway a woman with a baby in her arms. The woman was ragged and slatternly, but the baby—Robin thought that she had never seen so lovely a baby. Even in her terror and discom-

fort, he made her remember the little Murillo baby in the art gallery.

"They couldn't kill me," she thought. "People who have a baby like that wouldn't kill me." And she got some small reassurance from the thought.

But the woman did not look at all pleased when she saw Robin. She walked up to her at once as Robin stood by the mule trying to get some feeling back into her numb legs so that she could walk. The angry flood of questions directed first at Robin who did not answer, and then at the men who apparently gave very unsatisfactory answers, wrought her up into a state of fury.

Robin's assurance of safety vanished. This kind of woman was capable of anything. The men might threaten her but the woman would not wait for threats. Robin cowered against the mule and waited for her to strike. Just then the baby leaped in his mother's arms with hands stretched out toward Robin's bright head. The mother, caught unaware by the baby's lunge, would have dropped him if Robin had not sprung forward. The thud of his weight pushed her to the ground where she sat, glad of the support for her trembling body, while the baby plunged both fists into her hair.

Instantly the mother's mood changed. She joined the men in a great roar of laughter while they stood around Robin, watching the baby's vigorous attack on the golden mop.

Robin with tears smarting at the jerks, let him pull as hard as he pleased. She could bear this kind of hurt. She caught the word *fame* and gathered that the men were telling the woman that they were hungry, for she rushed into the shack and began to clatter pots and kettles. The men led the mules away to some tumble-down sheds from which Robin could hear a queer, shuffling noise.

Robin, left alone on the ground with the baby, tried to loosen his grip on her hair. But a lusty yell made her give up the attempt. The woman had immediately thrust her head out of the door and shouted something at her. The terror and the sudden vicious pulls were too much for Robin's nerves. She dropped her head on the baby's shoulder and cried softly to herself.

Suddenly she felt the baby lifted out of her lap and looked up at the old man towering over her. He pulled her up by the arm, muttering something which sounded like *ragazzo*. "He thinks I am a boy," Robin remembered that she had on her shorts, "and I suppose he is telling me that

boys don't cry." She rubbed the tears away with the back of her hand and followed him into the shack.

The sun had gone entirely from the valley now, and inside the hut it was quite dark except for a candle flickering on the table. The woman was frying something that looked like mush on a smoky stove. She motioned to the old man to put the baby on a mattress on the floor. At once the baby burst into a roar, and at a glance from the woman Robin ran to him and picked him up.

To her relief he seemed not to notice her hair in the gloom but settled back sleepily into her arms. She tried to remember Bianca's song, but when she began the strange sliding tune, the woman looked at her so sharply that she stopped at once. But the baby was asleep, soft and heavy in her lap. The woman laid him on the bed and beckoned Robin to the table.

Robin looked at the heavy black bread and strong-smelling lump of cheese. The fried mush had been divided between the two men, who ate it with hunks of bread which they tore wolfishly from the loaf. Robin could not eat. Something pressed against her throat so that she could not swallow food. "If I could have a glass of water,"

she thought, "maybe I could eat a little. They are angry because I refuse their food."

"Acqua," she said, holding her closed fist up to her mouth and tipping her head back. "Water, please."

They all stopped eating and stared at her. She shuddered under their black-browed attention. Perhaps she could get along without the water. But the younger man whose name sounded like Rafe seemed to understand, for he went to a pail by the door and dipped out a gourd of water. It did not look very clean but Robin dared not refuse it. She ate a few scraps of bread, and then tried to sit back with a satisfied look as if she had had all that she could possibly eat. She even managed an uncertain smile at the men when again they turned and stared at her. The guttural talking went on, with now and then a question thrown at her which Robin guessed was about where she came from. She shook her head that she did not understand. Surely they would carry her back when they found that she was worth no money. This woman certainly didn't want to keep her.

But the woman, who appeared to be Rafe's wife, had found Robin very useful. She made her clear the table, put the baby to sleep again when

he woke, draw some water, and finally carry faggots for the fire. Robin stumbled about, numb with fatigue. When there seemed no more errands, she sank down beside the baby on the mattress and fell asleep.

She was wakened by a roar of laughter. The three people sat about the candle on the table, looking at something which Robin recognized as her sketch pad. It must have fallen from her pocket. What were they doing with it?

As she watched she saw Rafe cradle his cheeks against his hands and rock back and forth with shut eyes. The others laughed and as the woman held up the pad to the light, Robin could see her sketch of the sleepy Tito. Suddenly the woman, whom they called Lotta, seemed to have an idea. With one of her quick terrifying motions, she sprang across the room and seized Robin by the shoulder. Robin shut her eyes tightly but Lotta only shook her harder.

Pulled to her feet and dragged across the room, Robin dropped on the rough stool and blinked at the candle. The old man seemed to expostulate but Lotta paid no attention to him. What were they going to do to her now? Robin woke to all the terror that she had shaken off in sleep.

Lotta brandished the sketch of Tito toward

her, and then repeated the gesture of Rafe, rocking her head back and forth with her hands folded against her cheeks. When her sharp black eyes were shut Robin could see where the baby got some of his beauty.

But now she was pointing to the baby, asleep on the floor. Robin looked at the soft little body, relaxed and quiet. The long dark lashes curled away from the curve of his cheek. He was lovely, but what did they want her to do with him now? She had put him to sleep.

Lotta soon made herself clear. She seized the pencil dangling from the pad and made huge scrawly lines on it. Then she thrust the pencil into Robin's hand and pointed to the baby again, rocking her cheek to sleep. Robin understood. She was to draw the baby for them as he lay asleep on the floor.

The pencil dropped from Robin's nerveless fingers. She was drugged with sleep and shaking with fear. She sat on her stool staring at the baby in a kind of daze. The group watched her expectantly. She could hear their heavy breathing behind her, and she expected Lotta to pounce on her at any moment. If father could only tell her how to go to work! She sat, helplessly weaving

her long fingers in and out, and looking at the baby.

The small body stirred restlessly as if such close scrutiny disturbed it. There, that was better! Robin bent forward, and behind her the three followed her motion. He was lovely, all soft curves even to his hair and lashes. She reached for the pencil without lifting her eyes from him. Some one put it in her fingers. Now if she could only make him look sleepy the way she had Tito!

A line here, a line there, she had blocked in the little figure as father had taught her. She was wide awake now, and as she drew, her fear seemed to run away from her down the pencil tip. She did not even notice the heads behind her which drew nearer and nearer. The baby! She must get him before he moved again.

Her pencil moved faster and surer. The candle flickered and grew dim. Robin turned her head impatiently, and looked straight into the three dark faces behind her. The sudden sense of their sinister presence brought back her fear. She flinched as if they had struck her and her pencil faltered in her hand. Then she realized that the fierce black eyes were not directed at her at all but were intent on her sketch pad. So intent that they had

not noticed the dying candle. She motioned for another light and some one brought it. When Lotta, in her eagerness to see, brushed against her arm, Robin shook her off indignantly. And Lotta drew back without remonstrance.

There, that was the best she could do. So much that she did not know how to get, with no one to tell her! Robin realized that for the first time she had seen much more than she knew how to draw. Father always signed his initials. She wrote "Robin" and the date; that made it look more finished. She rubbed her tired eyes, and laid the sketch on the table. Anyway the baby looked sound asleep!

The instant Robin dropped it, Lotta swept it up and covered it with kisses, crying, *"il mio bambino!"* From her dress she drew a big pin, and with the heel of her shoe she hammered the sketch on the wall. While she stood before it murmuring endearing phrases, the baby woke and cried. Lotta paid no attention to him until he made so much noise that she motioned impatiently to Robin to pick him up.

Too tired now to care what happened to her, Robin dropped on the mattress beside the baby and fell fast asleep quieting him. Once she awoke to realize that she was alone, curled up into a

corner like a small dog. She listened and peered into the thick darkness. Even the window was black from the forest close outside. She could hear the sound of soft prowlings outside as animals moved about. It was no use, she thought, to try to get away into that forest. Here at least she was safe for the night. If she could only hear the nightingales in her own garden! And lie in her big clean bed! She felt the rough burlap on the straw under her and shuddered.

What *would* Mrs. McGraw think? She could not make the natives understand her if she tried to tell them that Robin was lost. Suddenly she thought of Bianca. When she came back with Tito to carry Robin down the mountain, what would she do? Would she think that Robin had got tired of waiting, and had gone ahead down the mountain? Still Bianca knew about the hurt foot, and she knew how much Robin had wanted to stay with her and Tito. No, Bianca would not think that she had gone home.

Perhaps, then, if she were not too angry with Mrs. McGraw, she would try to make her understand how Robin had disappeared. Though if Mrs. McGraw blamed her for the trouble, as she probably would, Robin was afraid that Bianca would get angry again and stalk away.

Then she remembered Bianca's kindness to Tito, and how strong she was, and how she did everything so well. No, Bianca would not leave her to be carried off by banditti. The thought comforted Robin. She put her hand under her cheek away from the scratchy straw, and fell asleep again.

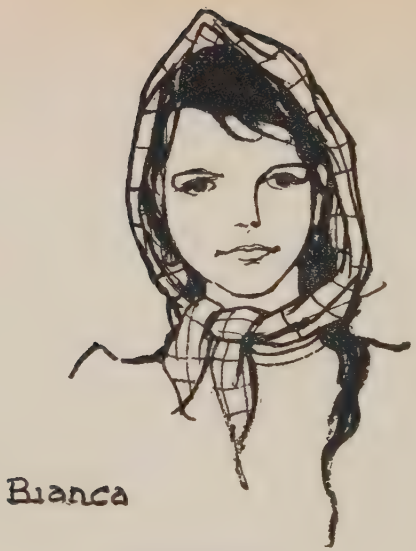
When she woke, Lotta was shaking her violently. She staggered from her narrow dark room out into the kitchen where the sun was streaming through the small square of the high window. The men had gone, and Lotta was apparently preparing to go off on an expedition of her own where she did not intend to take the baby. From gestures and the few words which Robin's more accustomed ear could catch, Lotta made it clear that the baby was to be left in her care. In her gay scarlet and black peasant costume, Lotta looked quite dashing.

The last thing that she did before leaving the hut was to take down the sketch from the wall and pin it carefully into the wide pocket of her sateen apron. Then she shut the door behind her, and to Robin's horror, barred it from the outside.

Robin looked at the baby who had crawled to the spot of sunshine and was contentedly rolling

in it. Her eyes followed the light up to the small square through which it came. She pulled a high stool under it, and climbing up, just managed to see out of it. The hut seemed to be on a roughly enclosed piece of ground with the woods backing up to the very edge of it. The ground looked very much trampled, but no one was in sight.

Robin jumped down and examined the room. There was no way to get out. Her foot felt so much better this morning that if she could only find a way out, she was sure that she could get back to the mule track on the mountain. On the table were the remains of the bread and cheese and a pail of goat's milk. Lotta had indicated that the baby was to have the goat's milk, and as Robin had no idea how much he could drink, she thought it safer to leave it all for him. She ate a crust of the bread and even tried the cheese which tasted better than it smelled. She wondered how she had ever refused porridge.



CHAPTER V

THE SEARCH

THE forenoon dragged on. Robin watched the sun crawl over the kitchen floor, and wondered if Bianca had made Mrs. McGraw understand yet what had happened. The baby was good. When he cried, Robin gave him some milk and he slept again. He was evidently used to entertaining himself, though his only toy seemed to be a round potato.

She tried to make the untidy room neat, but

Lotta was apparently a poor housekeeper, for there seemed nothing to clean it with. She sat on her stool and watched the baby. Instead of creeping, he humped himself up like a little camel and trotted around the room on all fours. As the sun crept on to her hair, he came straight for her and tried to pull himself up where he could reach it. Robin moved into the shade and sent him humping after his potato toy which she rolled across the floor for him.

His gait made Robin laugh and she picked up her pencil and pad which were still lying on the table. If she could only get his funny, adorable back view! With no one watching her, it would be fun to try it. When she ran around behind him, he would face about and chuckle at her. The chase and the sketch became very absorbing. Between them Robin had almost forgotten where she was, when suddenly she heard something which made her lift her head and listen intently.

Far off through the woods came the faint hee-haw, aw-aw, of a distant donkey. Perhaps, oh, could it possibly be, perhaps it might be Tito! When she put the pad down she discovered that her hands were trembling. She pulled the stool back under the window and climbed up on it,

knowing that she could see nothing so far away, but hoping to hear again that distant bray.

The woods lay perfectly still, their shadows deep in the sunshine. Robin judged from them that it must be about noon, though she felt that it should already be getting dark. Had she imagined the sound because she wanted so much to hear it? She dared not call because she did not know where the brigands were, or what they would do to her, or to any one who came to get her.

Her chin just resting on the edge of the window, Robin stretched tiptoe on her stool and waited. The baby had followed her and propped himself up against the legs of the stool where he patiently sucked his potato. After a long, long time, the silence of the forest was broken by a faint rustle. Quiet again, and though Robin peered as far into the shadows as she could strain her eyes to see, not a leaf moved.

Was that a bird song, that queer note? Very softly Robin heard it slip into the strange sliding tune that Bianca sang. It was so soft that it was scarcely a murmur, but Robin recognized it. It stopped. Suddenly Robin knew what to do. Just as softly, she took up the tune and sang it under her breath.

Then like one of the shadows of the forest itself, Robin saw a flutter of Bianca's blue skirt behind a great tree trunk. She pulled her handkerchief from her pocket, and reaching out of the window as far as she could, waved it up and down. There, Bianca had seen it! She was waving back at her. Robin beckoned, calling softly, "No one is here. Come nearer."

Another instant and Bianca stood under the window. "You are not hurt?" she breathed, and Robin could see her anxious upturned face.

"Oh, no," she returned, as softly, "but I can't get out. The window is too small and the door is barred—but oh, Bianca, it is barred from the outside! You can open it! Quick! Try it!" and Robin leaped from the stool.

Bianca disappeared. Robin, close to the door, heard a grating noise, it was flung back, and Bianca stood beside her, breathless, excited. "Now come!" she ordered. "Come at once. Can you run?"

"Yes, my foot is better! Quick!" Robin was breathless too.

"Quick, indeed! Tito is tied in the wood. He will trot more swiftly than you could run!" She seized Robin's hand.

With Bianca's grasp, Robin felt a clutch at

her foot. The baby! In their excitement they had not noticed him humping his way across the room to the open door. Robin caught him up distractedly.

"What shall I do with him! Oh, Bianca, the baby! What shall I do with him!"

Bianca whirled about, scowling at the baby in Robin's arms. But the baby was used to dark looks. He chuckled engagingly at her. "Do with him! Leave him! *Mà!* Would you kidnap from the kidnaper! See, the stove has no fire, and no harm can come to him. I will bar the door again. Quick—ah-h-h," Bianca's voice died away into a groan, "we are too late."

Around the corner of the hut appeared the shaggy head of Rafe. He rushed forward, his black scowl bent on them when he saw them with his baby. Robin cowered back, still clutching the baby. No use to try to escape this terrible man charging down upon them. She shut her eyes, not knowing what to expect, when the most unexpected thing happened. She heard Bianca laugh! Had she gone mad?

Robin opened her eyes and looked at Bianca, and then at Rafe who had seated himself on the stump of a tree and who was looking almost pleasant. Bianca was speaking the queer dialect,

but Robin was used enough to her speech to pick out a word now and then. The man she could still understand very little.

"So it is you!" Bianca said. "You who have carried off this girl. And was it to take care of your *bambino?*"

The man looked puzzled at Bianca's mention of a girl. He reached for his baby and sat down on the door stone with him, where he talked to Bianca in his guttural tongue, pointing now up the mountain, now at Robin. Again Bianca laughed. What was it all about? Robin could not believe that anything very bad was about to happen if Bianca could laugh. Perhaps the brigand would allow Bianca to go after the money. Surely Mrs. McGraw would give it to her if she knew where Robin was!

The man glowered fiercely and asked Bianca a question. "He wishes to know where Lotta, his wife, has gone."

"Oh, Bianca," cried Robin earnestly, "tell him that I have done nothing to his wife. She went away all dressed up and left the baby with me. I know nothing about her!"

Again Bianca laughed. She seemed to find it all very amusing. *"Mà,* but he is angry at Lotta for leaving the baby! She will find a good scolding

when she returns from her gadding. Come now, we will go. And we will go at our ease this time. It is well we did not waste our breath with running."

Robin caught up her sketch pad from the floor where the baby had thrown it, and started after Bianca. She could not believe that she was really going. She wanted to say good-by to the baby but she dared not stop for anything. At the edge of the wood, Bianca turned and waved her hand. Mechanically Robin did the same. Was this gesture to pacify the brigand so that he would not shoot?

"That is right," approved Bianca. "Say farewell to the one who has protected you."

Robin was still ready to break into a swift run. "Protected me! You do not understand, Bianca! Oh, come quickly, quickly! Let us get away while we can!"

"There is no hurry." Bianca still sounded amused. "Except that we must find the village police before they have lost their breath hurrying to save you, we have no need to make haste."

Nevertheless Robin broke into a trot and not until she saw the small gray Tito peacefully chewing the leaves of the tree to which he was tied did she feel reassured enough to stand still. Behind

was the memory of that dark night in the dirty hut; ahead of her was the clean, sunshiny villa and the walled-in garden. Robin thought that she would not mind Mrs. McGraw's scolding if she could once reach that haven.

"Your foot is not well yet," said Bianca who had seen her limp even as she ran. "You must ride Tito whether you wish or not. The later we are, the worse the old one will be."

Robin reflected that Bianca was probably right. She felt a little uneasy about her way of mounting Tito, but anyway she knew better than to drop down on his back from a tree. She put one foot into the stirrup, hoisted herself into the saddle, and pulled the other leg up over Tito's neck and down into the stirrup.

Bianca watched her in silent amazement. "Is it because your foot hurts that you climb thus on Tito?"

Robin settled herself more firmly. "Never mind," she said.

Bianca shook her head. "What a way!" she said. "Did you mount the big mule of Rafe thus?"

"Bianca," Robin leaned out of her saddle, "Bianca, the bandit tied me to the mule so that I could not escape!"

Bianca looked unimpressed. "Tied you so that you would not fall off," she corrected. "He must have noticed your way with a donkey!"

Robin flushed angrily. "Why do you make fun now?" she asked. "You were not laughing when you crept out from the forest for me."

"It is true," said Bianca, sobering. "I had thought that you had been carried off."

"Well, wasn't I?" asked Robin indignantly.

"Yes, you were. But not by banditti. The good Rafe and his father found you alone beside a deserted path. They saw that you were hurt and they dared not leave you there with night coming on. You would not tell them who you were, and because of their many goats waiting to be milked they could not take you to the village police." She laughed. "He still will not believe that you are a girl. A girl would cry, he says, and moreover, you are not dressed as a girl."

Robin remembered the trampled enclosure, the sounds of the animals prowling about outside. She drew a long breath. So they were goats! And the father had probably taken them away to feed on the mountain side in the morning. The father had seen her cry. But he had not told.

"But, Bianca, they locked me in the hut. Why did they treat me like a prisoner?"

"They were afraid that you would wander away again into the mountains where the wicked night prowler would leap upon you and seize you." Bianca clutched at her throat as Rafe had done.

Robin began to understand. "But they spoke so fiercely, Bianca. They looked so black and ugly."

Bianca laughed. "The poor Rafe! As gentle as my Tito! Can he help it if his face is not beautiful, or if the sun has burned him black? And whose voice would not get rough with calling stubborn goats? Would that all of the world were as kind as these ugly goat herds! Only yesterday at Sola he gave me more of that good cheese which you liked so much! I have seen him often in the market place, but I did not know where he herded his goats when the weather grew warm enough."

They were moving along the mountain trail now with that marvelous security and ease which Bianca and the small Tito seemed to feel on a rough path. Robin astride the donkey, with no concern except to hold the reins, thought back over her experience. It was as Bianca said, she had been in no danger. Robin felt a little dashed. Probably Mrs. McGraw was sitting calmly at

home waiting until she came back. Nobody had been at all worried except herself.

"Well, anyway," she sighed, "I'm glad that nice baby doesn't live with brigands."

"It is well," agreed Bianca. "His mother, Lotta, is enough for one child to bear! She dashes about like an untamed hawk!"

Robin laughed, remembering Lotta's sudden swoops, and the way she managed her household. The only time that she had been quiet was while Robin drew her baby. And that beak-like scrutiny! Robin didn't like to think of it even now.

Just then they turned into the wider mule track which led down to the village. Bianca stood still and gazed up the mountain side toward Sola. The trail was deserted.

Bianca shook her head. "It is as I thought." She sounded disgusted. "Either we must climb all the way to Sola to drag the police away from their search, or wait here all day until they weary of it. I would let them perish of their efforts if it were not for the old one!"

Robin straightened up in her saddle. This sounded interesting! "Do you mean, Bianca, that the police are really hunting for me?"

"But of course! And I told them how last night

I had found the prints in the dust of the mule and the two men. I told them, too, just where the tracks had turned off into the forest path. But would they listen? I could have come for you myself last night if I had known that it was not banditti who had carried you off."

Robin felt considerably cheered. "Were you scared last night?" she asked casually.

Bianca turned somber black eyes on her. "Was I scared? Never in my life have I felt such fear seize me. My blood turned to water. It is enough. I do not wish to remember that fear in the daytime. It will chase me into my dreams often enough." She brushed away the haunting thoughts with her hand. *"Mà!* Those police! They would not stir until morning though we begged them. And then they must go their own way, not as I told them. I could wait no longer, so I came for you."

"Ah, Bianca!" How could Robin thank her? Gallant Bianca! But Bianca swerved away from thanks.

"Avante! They are in Sola. The lost one is here. Before they destroy the village we must meet them." She jerked at Tito's halter and they started up the mountain.

At the very next curve Bianca halted. Moving slowly down the mountain they could see a group of people. "They are returning from their search." Bianca drew up under the tree. "Here is where I left you before. But here I shall stay with you this time. Come, I will show you how to mount a donkey while we wait."

Robin watched her. That foot flung out over Tito's back, the swift straightening into the saddle, the ease that made it seem all one motion. Robin became so engrossed in trying to attain that backward fling of the leg that she forgot to watch the descent of the searchers. She looked up from a triumphant swing square into the middle of Tito's saddle to see two mounted men rounding the curve. Well behind, she could see at least one woman.

Her satisfaction left her. "Bianca," she slid down from Tito's back, "Bianca, who is that woman with the police?"

"Who should it be," asked Bianca, "but the old one?"

Robin looked back at the woods from which they had come, then down the mule track. "Don't you think," she asked, "that we might just as well move on?"

Bianca put a detaining hand on her arm. "You stay right here," she advised. "Would you run away when the old one, who has died of fright all night, is about to come alive again at seeing you? Shame!"

This time Robin did not pretend to be casual. "Was she really scared? Did she feel worried because I did not come?"

Again Bianca turned that somber gaze upon her. "Wait until you see her," was all she said. Then turning to the two policemen who had reined in their dilapidated horses with a good deal of pomp, "Well, *Signore Capitano,* what luck attended your prodigious efforts?"

The men stared down their noses into her saucy face. "My good girl," said the bearded one, "this is no matter for jest. The girl is indeed lost."

"It depends on who jests," returned Bianca. "Here is your lost girl," and she pointed at Robin who stood on one leg by Tito, looking very uncomfortable.

The men transferred their stare to Robin. Then back again to Bianca, in deep disapproval. "Must you still jest? This is no girl, as any one can well see!" They touched their horses with rusty spurs

and rode down the mountain. Bianca's clear laughter followed them. "Let them hunt all day. They must do something."

"Now," she said, turning toward the rest of the group which was slowly approaching, "when I say three, open your mouth and shout as if the banditti were sticking knives into you. *Uno, due, tre!*"

Robin opened her mouth at *tre,* and the two shouted together. But the wind was blowing in the opposite direction and no one would have heard them if Tito, startled by the sudden yell in his ears, had not opened his mouth and hee-hawed distractedly until Robin could not hear her own voice. The group halted and stared about for the source of the racket.

As Robin stood waving her arms, she was outlined sharply from her bright head to her feet against the black rock. A woman detached herself from the group and stumbled forward in a halting run. Without waiting for Bianca's prompting *"Avante!"* Robin raced up the path. Hurry, hurry! She could see the working face, the heavy, stumbling body!

And then she was stopped by the rush of Mrs. McGraw toward her. The stiff old Scotchwoman dropped on her knees beside her, and cuddled her

close to her shoulder. Robin could hear her whimpering softly as if she wanted to cry but wouldn't. But above everything Robin felt the protecting kindness of her arms, and she knew that even if she had made her suffer so terribly, Mrs. McGraw had forgiven her and they were friends.

"I am sorry," she said, so softly that only Mrs. McGraw could hear her, "I will not go away from you again."

Mrs. McGraw hugged her tighter, and then stood up, herself again. "Now," she said, "it is about time that we began to get this queer business straightened out." She beckoned peremptorily to the group that she had outdistanced.

A squad of four men in odds and ends of police decoration advanced toward Mrs. McGraw, separated with military precision, and saluted. As their ranks opened, Robin saw to her amazement, standing in their midst, Lotta. Lotta, weeping, disheveled, angry! As soon as the men parted and Lotta caught sight of Robin, she flew at her with such fury that Robin shrank behind Mrs. McGraw. Was the woman finally going to kill her?

"Now, now, my girl, none of that!" Mrs. McGraw held Lotta's arms firmly at her sides. The

police advanced and surrounded her again. "She's a lunatic," Mrs. McGraw called to Bianca, "best keep away from her!"

For Bianca had burst through the cordon and, arms around the sobbing Lotta, was consoling her at the same time that she told the police her opinion of them.

Mrs. McGraw looked utterly bewildered. "Will somebody stop talking this gibberish," she demanded, "long enough to tell me what it is all about? Here we have the woman who stole Robin with the evidence in her hand. Yet the child appears from nowhere, and the kidnaper gets hugged. Now who's to make sense out of that? Keep away, Robin," she cried sharply, "she's nae responsible!"

For Robin at the word, evidence, had seen what poor Lotta held crumpled in her hand. Her own sketch of the baby! She darted forward and with one swift motion pulled her sketch pad from her pocket and thrust it under Lotta's dripping eyes. Instantly the weeping stopped, the anger fled. Lotta burst out laughing, then she looked a little shocked, and then she laughed again.

"Take it!" Robin implored. "Tell her to take it, Bianca!"

But Lotta pushed it away, still looking half

pleased, half shocked. Bianca laughed. "She thinks it is not quite proper, this back view of the *bambino*. But she refuses to give up the picture in her hand."

"Well, why should she?" demanded Robin hotly. "It's hers!"

Bianca shrugged and pointed to the corner where Robin had signed her name and the date. "Does this not prove that you are stolen?" She gleamed wickedly at the police who pretended not to see her. "And if you are not recovered by *la polizia,* you must still be stolen. Thus our poor Lotta is guilty."

Lotta showed signs of returning fury. Robin hurried back to Mrs. McGraw. "Tell them to let her go," she begged. "Nobody stole me! I gave Lotta the sketch. Oh, please, Mrs. McGraw! I will explain!"

Mrs. McGraw considered. "Sure no one stole you?" she asked.

"Positive!" Robin bobbed her head. "They thought I was lost and took me in. Then Bianca came for me this morning."

Mrs. McGraw turned her regard on Bianca. "She's a canny lass," she remarked. "Weel, if you say so. *Ecco!*" she exploded at the police who looked as surprised as Robin at the Italian word.

"Now listen to me. This woman is to go, to *go*, do you see?" She waved her hand to express freedom. From a deep pocket in her skirt she pulled out a worn purse, and Robin was amazed to see her deal out to each of the men a sum of money such as she would never spend on herself.

"She had enough for the ransom," Robin thought, "and she would have spent it all on me. I will never think her mean again."

Lotta looked incredulous when the men stepped aside and motioned her to go. She seemed to realize that some of the good luck had come through Robin, for as she dashed past her she dropped a kiss on her hand. Then awaiting no explanations, she skimmed down the mountain side toward home. Robin could see the fluttering white scrap in her hand. She tucked the discarded sketch back into her pocket, and leaned against Mrs. McGraw. She had suddenly realized that she was very tired.

Mrs. McGraw put a strong arm around her. "Did I not tell your father," she grumbled, "that no good would come of letting you draw pictures all the time!"

Robin sighed. She had no mind to argue anything. "But after all," she offered in a small, tired voice, "you found out where I was by the sketch."

She thought of the eager, dark faces watching her in the gloom. "And they liked it very much."

"Humph!" snorted Mrs. McGraw. "These Italians; Nae doot the picture is more precious to them than the baby!"

CHAPTER VI

ROBIN'S GUEST RETURNS

THE trip home Robin remembered in a vague sort of way as if it had not really happened. She sat on Tito's back, her head nodding with the weariness of the long anxious night. She was aware that every now and then a supporting arm was put around her and that near her was that kind shoulder. It somehow made her feel comfortable and drowsy. Somewhere on the route the police left them, but Bianca came up to the very door that Robin might ride Tito. She heard sleepily Mrs. McGraw and Bianca talking different languages to each other, but their voices sounded pleasant and she did not bother to translate for them. Half asleep she ate some hot carrot stew which tasted very good, and then some-

how she was in her big clean bed and sound asleep.

When she woke it was noon of the next day. Some one had drawn the curtains so that the room was cool and dark. On the table by her bed were a glass of orange juice and some bread and milk. Robin sat up and devoured them. How good the clean food tasted! She would go right down and tell Mrs. McGraw how much she liked it. Maybe get some more. But before she could carry out her intentions she was asleep again.

This time when she woke, the curtains had been pushed open and the room was full of golden afternoon light. Robin could hear voices somewhere in the house. She felt rested and very hungry. Perhaps Bianca had already come on her way down the mountain from her work. She must hurry downstairs.

When Robin entered the kitchen she found the table spread for tea. At one end of it sat Mrs. McGraw pouring from a large teapot which she never used. At the other end sat Bianca looking quite at home. On her plate were two hot buttered scones and before her was a jar of amber honey. A third place had been set on the side between them.

Mrs. McGraw looked up. "I was just coming to

get you," she said. "Unless you would sleep the day and night around, it is time you were up." She put a hot scone on Robin's plate and poured her a cup of pale tea. "For once it will not hurt," she said.

Robin slipped into her chair. The tea that Mrs. McGraw always had by herself and that she was never allowed to interrupt! And here sat Bianca evidently having a very good time. She grinned at Robin and went right on talking to Mrs. McGraw.

Bianca reached out of the window and broke off a small twig from the vine which grew over it. She stuck it into her scone so that it stood upright. "The plant," she indicated. Mrs. McGraw nodded. Bianca plowed a careful little trench on each side of the twig and pretended to sift something into it. "The fertilizer," she explained. "The plant," she pointed at it, "is hungry. Give it food." She pointed to her own mouth, rubbing her stomach with a forlorn look. Then she lifted the scone and took a large bite, smiling beatifically.

"And does the girl think I don't know *that!* Tell her," Mrs. McGraw turned to Robin, "now you are here, tell her for me that I always give my plants fertilizer."

"Not the right kind then," was Bianca's placid response.

The argument ended with a trip to the garden where Bianca viewed with real distress the plants that she had left at the gate. She got down on her knees beside them, loosening up the earth. "To-morrow," she said, "I will bring new life to the poor things. They have missed me."

To Robin's surprise Mrs. McGraw took this offer in good part. "I hate to see green things die," she said. "If she can make them grow, let her. And ask her what good they are once they are grown."

She looked doubtful when the excellence of *finocchi* was explained to her. "I would not eat the stuff myself," she told Robin, "but I'll cook it for you if you'll eat it. Better heathen grass than nothing at all!"

"My mother will be waiting and the supper will be cold. Here, Tito," and Bianca untied him.

Robin thought of the hot macaroni with tomato sauce and her mouth watered. Then she remembered the dry black bread and cheese and decided that porridge was not so bad. Just then she heard Mrs. McGraw saying—could she believe her ears?—"Ask her why she doesn't leave

the small donkey here with you since she has to come past here in the morning."

Bianca considered the idea while Robin watched her anxiously. Finally she said, "What would he have for his supper?"

"Clover!" cried Robin. "I will pick him great armfuls."

Mrs. McGraw listened. "A carrot or two," she offered, "I recall he likes them."

"Very well," Bianca decided. "He may stay. I will be here early for him."

Mrs. McGraw nodded at Robin. " 'Twill give you something to think about," was all she said.

Mrs. McGraw was right. Tito gave Robin a good deal to think about. She had no time at all to remember her fears in the dark hut. Tito ate an enormous amount of clover. "I suppose it cooks down to a very small amount in his stomach," thought Robin who had seen Mrs. McGraw put a large pot of fresh spinach on the fire and take off a small bowlful. "I ought to get enough for his breakfast, too, because he starts so early." But as fast as she laid aside a bundle of the clover, Tito ate it, so she gave up the idea of providing anything ahead for him.

By bedtime she was well tired out. "You'll sleep in spite of your long nap," Mrs. McGraw

Robin could stand it no longer

nodded her satisfaction. "Tie the little beast up, and to bed with you!"

Robin chose a tree where she could see Tito from her bedroom window and tied him securely. "No visits to the vegetable garden to-night," she warned him.

Tito flapped his ears and looked wise.

Robin slipped out of bed two or three times to see if Tito was all right. Each time he stood like a small shadowy statue under his tree. "Does he never lie down?" she worried. "He is not used to sleeping outdoors at night. Perhaps he is cold."

At last when the moon hung low over the sea, and the nightingales had all tuned up together into their sleepless song, Robin could stand it no longer. Tito looked so lonely and little down there under the tree. And if he did not lie down and rest he would not be ready for his work in the morning. Robin pulled on her bathrobe and slippers and crept down the stairs.

The side door into the garden was quite large enough, and Tito was used to stairs. She might try to bring him back with her that way. When Robin appeared so silently and unexpectedly beside him, Tito made a startled leap away from her. Then with a deft twitch of his strong little neck, he snapped his halter and cantered down

the garden path. Robin had not reckoned on having to chase him into more pleasant quarters.

"He's not glad to see me at all," she panted as she raced around the garden. "I'd just leave him out here to be as lonesome as he liked if he hadn't broken his rope. But who knows what he would do before morning!"

Tito seemed to have managed enough rest standing up to feel very brisk. He dodged about the paths, stopping only to seize mouthfuls of heliotrope and freesias. The nightingales were frightened into silence, and the only sounds were the *clop, clop,* of Tito's hoofs and the scuffle of Robin's bedroom slippers. She dared not call him for fear of rousing Mrs. McGraw, and he was too quick for her to catch his rope.

But Tito was used to open doors. When he saw one, he knew what to do. Without waiting for Robin he dashed through the side door which she had left open. Clatter, clatter, away out in the garden behind him Robin could hear him trotting up the stairs. Where she had meant to lead him so slowly and softly! She fled after him, panic adding to her breathlessness.

On the first landing she caught him, his head hanging down as if he had been overcome with sleep the minute he got into the house where he

belonged. They stood there in the silence a moment. Mrs. McGraw was a sound sleeper and her room was in another part of the villa. Could it be that she had not wakened, after all? Not a sound! Robin held the sleepy Tito by his long ears for a while before she decided that they were out of danger.

Then she realized that unless they moved soon, Tito would stay right there on the landing, sound asleep, for the rest of the night. Pulling out her bathrobe cord, she knotted it around his neck.

"Now you walk yourself along with me," she said, "and see that you make no noise."

Tito slept on.

"Come *on!*" Robin jerked the bathrobe cord. How would Mrs. McGraw feel if she walked up the stairs in the morning and found a donkey asleep on the landing?

But Tito seemed to be perfectly satisfied where he was. His head drooped lower and lower. His knees bent a little as if he considered lying down.

"Once he gets down," Robin thought, "I'll never move him in the world!"

Then she remembered how well he had minded when she showed him the switch. She twisted the cord around the baluster post and fled back to the garden. A branch from the nearest shrub,

and back again up the stairs. Tito was lying peacefully across the landing, his legs stretched out over the stairs.

Robin flicked one of them lightly with the switch. He opened a sleepy eye. She flicked each of the other three legs. Tito mumbled in his throat, pulled in his legs, and stumbled to his feet. Afraid that the mumble might lead to a hee-haw, Robin hurried him up the rest of the stairs and into her room.

She shut the door and led him to the darkest corner of the room. As he passed the window, he leaned out and snatched a mouthful of vine leaves. Robin could hear him chaunking on them long after she was back in bed. Then he quieted down, she heard him flop on the floor, and except for an outraged whistle or two from the disturbed nightingales, the night was still again.

Robin slept on until she was wakened by the sound of the opening door. She turned her head to see Mrs. McGraw in the doorway, staring with horrified eyes at the window. Robin twisted around and saw Tito leaning over the sill while he made a breakfast of the rose vine.

"Oh, my goodness!" she leaped out of bed and seized the dangling end of the woolen cord. "I was going to get up early and take him out!"

"But who got up and took him in?" Mrs. McGraw was plainly bewildered as well as horrified. "Or did he climb up the vine and walk in himself?"

Robin remembered her dream about him. "I think he could have," she said, "but he didn't. Please excuse me, Mrs. McGraw, he looked so lonesome that I invited him in."

She stood there in her pajamas, holding fast to the donkey's cord and looking very anxious. But Tito who was used to an early breakfast and who did not like to be wrenched away from the one he had managed to get for himself, stretched his neck, and before Robin could stop him, had burst into a protesting bray.

Within the walls of a room, the sound was deafening. Robin clapped her hands over her ears, and Tito, free from her grasp, stalked by the astonished Mrs. McGraw out of the room and straight into the arms of Bianca.

"Mà! What shall I live to see next from this wicked one!" Bianca seized the donkey about the neck and strode down the stairs with him. "I come to take you to your work, and where do I find you? Hiding in the house, and screaming like a soul in purgatory! But wait till I find my switch!"

Robin brushed by Mrs. McGraw who still stood dazed at the door. "Wait, Bianca!" she called. "It is not Tito's fault. I took him in last night. And now he cries for his breakfast!"

Bianca backed the donkey under a tree and tied him. "Is it so?" she turned and looked at Robin in her pajamas. "Then your sense is indeed not that of a small donkey." But her eyes and teeth gleamed so that Robin knew that she was not angry.

By this time Mrs. McGraw had found her way downstairs. She shook her head at the meek little donkey under the tree, and then caught Robin's anxious eye.

"After all," she conceded, "no harm has been done. And if the fleas came in with him, it is you they will torment, not me. Go put your clothes on and come for your breakfast." Then to Robin's surprise she added, "Perhaps the girl will take a dish of porridge with you. You might ask her."

Bianca looked pleased but she picked up her pail from under the tree. "My lunch is here, and it is almost time for it now. We must hurry!" Then as she saw Robin's longing eyes fixed on her pail, she whisked the cover off. "Quickly, bring me a small dish," she cried. "It is macaroni and tomato again which you like so much. Smell the

good hot fragrance!" and she swooped the pail under Mrs. McGraw's curious nose.

Mrs. McGraw drew back. "And what does she think I would do with that slimy mess!" she sputtered. "Nothing else do they eat in this heathen country!"

"It's for me," pleaded Robin. "Oh, please, Mrs. McGraw, could I have just a little for my breakfast? It is so good!"

"Breakfast! Macaroni! What is the child thinking about with good porridge waiting on the stove for her! You wouldn't eat the stuff, would you, Robin?"

"Yes, I would, Mrs. McGraw," Robin stood staunchly by her choice, "I'd eat it for breakfast and for lunch and for dinner. If it was as good as Bianca's macaroni."

Mrs. McGraw stepped into the kitchen and produced a dish which she held out grimly to Bianca. "Very well," she said. "We will see what the food is that the child could eat three times a day. It must be the American blood in her that gives her such taste!" She slipped a cup cake into Bianca's diminished lunch and paid no further attention to her departure.

Mrs. McGraw watched Robin, still grimly, while she ate every last bit in the dish and then

carefully wiped out the tomato with the soft part of her breakfast roll as Bianca had taught her. "Oh, very well," Mrs. McGraw conceded again, "I will ask the girl how she does it. The child must eat."

All that day Robin felt lazy and strangely contented. She wandered about the garden and lay in the warm sunshine, her head down among the freesias breathing their fragrance while she half-slept the day away. After all, this garden was a pleasant place with Bianca and Tito coming back to it when their work was done. And Bianca had promised to stop on her way home, though she refused to leave Tito again. Mrs. McGraw did not urge her.

In the afternoon the sky grew soft and filmy as if a pale yellow veil were drawn over it. "It might be that we would get some rain at last," Mrs. McGraw said. She was carrying her big watering pot back and forth from the kitchen to the vegetable garden. "I doot, though, if this country knows what a good rain is. They should see the Scotland mist!" and her eyes looked longingly at the sky as if she wished that she could see it herself.

"She's lonesome, too," thought Robin, "and she has no Tito to play with."

When Bianca came, she looked tired and worried. She would not stay, though Mrs. McGraw came out and offered her some tea. *"Non grazie,* I must hurry home to my mother. She is of a nervous temperament, and she has seen the smoke in the sky."

Mrs. McGraw turned an inquiring eye to the sky. "Well, I might have known that this country could not raise a decent rain. Now where does the smoke come from?"

"Tell the old one," Bianca answered gloomily to Robin's question, "that the devil mountain is at its evil work again. So far it is nothing, but who knows what it may have planned in its wicked heart. We shall see! But now I must go and tell my mother it is nothing."

CHAPTER VII

THE BLUE GROTTO

THE next day the wind had shifted, and blowing over the sea, seemed to splash its deep blue back into the sky again. When Bianca hurried in on her way to her garden, her spirits had lifted with the veil of smoke. She had twisted gay anemones into Tito's harness so that he had a holiday air. His small hoofs pranced enough to keep Mrs. McGraw moving toward his head end. Robin wondered if she would mind the way Bianca and Tito seemed to take it for granted that they would be welcome whenever they chanced to drop in. But she decided that Mrs. McGraw could not be much annoyed since she came out where Bianca was and insisted that everything she said should be translated to her. Bianca's swift and frequent gestures were making it easy for her to become a good guesser, anyway. Robin had to be careful to leave nothing out.

"To-day I return early," cried Bianca, eyes and teeth gleaming, "to do for my mother the one

thing which will give her ease of mind. She wishes me to go down to Mero," Bianca's sweep of arm indicated the tiny fishing village that Robin had often watched over the garden wall, "where my uncle lives, and ask him if we are in danger from the devil mountain. This she decided upon last night when the smoke was thick, and I hurried away before the clean air had made her change her mind." Bianca faced Robin. "You will come with me?"

Robin grasped at her good luck before it could get away from her. Mrs. McGraw must be made to see how necessary it was for her to go. How could she convince her when it was so soon after her fright about brigands? Yet to go with Bianca and Tito down to the sea where the fishermen lived— When Robin turned her face up to Mrs. McGraw's inquiring gaze, it was quite pale with suspense. The pupils of her eyes made the blue look so deep and dark that Mrs. McGraw was startled.

"What has the girl told you?" her voice was sharp with anxiety. "What is wrong?"

"Oh, nothing is wrong," Robin caught at Mrs. McGraw's folded arms with pleading hands, "only, Mrs. McGraw, could I please—would you

let me—don't you think I might—oh, Mrs. McGraw!"

"What I think is," said Mrs. McGraw, but she did not shake off the hands. Indeed, she folded her arms differently so that they closed over the brown fingers a little closer. "What I think is that I could understand what you want better if that girl told me in her own heathen tongue. Now what is it?"

Robin felt about for some argument which would convince Mrs. McGraw. She looked despairingly over at Bianca who threw her an encouraging smile. "Ask the old one to go along too," she prompted.

Robin seized upon the suggestion. "Bianca has invited us to go with her down to Mero where her uncle lives. We could make it our walk. It is not far. And along a nice road." The sentences came in little breathless leaps.

Bianca interrupted. "Tell her that my uncle will take us out in his boat to the blue grotto. Never has the old one seen anything so beautiful."

Robin's eyes burned quite black now under her thatch of yellow hair. Even her golden tan seemed to pale as she stared up at Mrs. McGraw. She must go, she thought, she must let me go.

Surprisingly enough, she did decide to go. And

seemed sufficiently rewarded when the color came back into Robin's face, and the brown fingers of their own accord tucked themselves into the crook of the folded arms, and stayed there while the arrangements were settled with Bianca.

They would start when Bianca came back with her load of vegetables from her garden. "Some for my uncle as a gift, and some," she added, thriftily, "to sell to those who cannot raise such vegetables as mine by the sea. But for the climb back again, I would sell at Mero every day. But say nothing of the climb." She nodded hastily in Mrs. McGraw's direction.

It was not necessary to say anything about the climb by the time they had made half the descent to Mero. Down, down, dropped the road like a pale roll of ribbon that some one had dropped and that was unwinding itself crazily down to the sea. Now and then Mrs. McGraw would turn and look back at the pieces of it that gleamed out above her. "It is bad enough getting down," she said, planting her heels into the dust and leaning back on them, "but who is going to hoist me up again?"

"You could ride Tito," Robin tried to encourage her. They must go on now. "He will have no load to carry then——"

Mrs. McGraw cast a scornful glance at the small Tito with his green garden tilted over his head as he sloped down the hill. "*I* might carry him," she snorted, "but I'm thinking we'll neither of us expect help from the other. If we have good sense."

Halfway down they came to a vine-covered pension with a sign on it which said *SALA DA THE*, and under it the words, English Tea With Muffins. Mrs. McGraw stared longingly at the cool green shelter. Robin tried to hurry by. But Bianca halted and looked wisely at Mrs. McGraw's hot face. "If she is red now," she said, "what color will she turn when she climbs? She shall stay here."

"Oh, *no!*" cried Robin, "*no, no, no!* I don't want to stay here in a tea house. I want to go with you and Tito! Oh, *no!*"

"Be quiet, then, if you would not scare the old one. Who said you would not go? You have not the sense of Tito who quietly waits." She stepped up beside the exhausted Mrs. McGraw and pointing to the vine-covered porch with its little tables, made the motions of drinking and fanning herself. Then an expression of complete content spread over her face as if all her needs had been

satisfied. Clearly the tea room must be a comfortable place.

"Without my tea I am a poor thing," admitted Mrs. McGraw. "But you, Robin, you will be disappointed. And the girl could not wait with all that way to climb ahead of her."

"Tell her," said Bianca calmly, "that you are going on with me and Tito. That my uncle is a man of noble character who will take such care of our comfort and pleasure that we will return rested and refreshed. Tell her that the road is straight and simple, and that even a new-born babe could not lose himself on it. Tell her that we will return for her in a moment or two over an hour. It is well not to be too exact."

Mrs. McGraw protested, but fortunately a maid in a cool green dress which matched the vines came out on the porch and laid a white cloth on one of the tables. When she smiled invitingly at the group in the hot sun, Mrs. McGraw capitulated. "Oh, very well," she said, "I will stay here a few moments for my tea. Then I will come to meet you."

"She will not move from the side of the teapot until our return," prophesied Bianca. "Now *hurry!*"

As they scurried down the road, pulling the indignant Tito who liked to take his own pace, they heard Mrs. McGraw calling something.

"*Addio! Addio!*" called back Bianca without turning around.

"Good-by! Good-by!" Robin pelted along beside her.

And then, "Hee-haw! Hee-haw!" drowned any further sound.

Around the curve Bianca slowed her pace. "It is well," she panted, "that our Tito can say farewell for himself. Otherwise there might have been directions about the grotto which would have met our ears in spite of ourselves."

Robin looked at Bianca, and Bianca looked at her. The two nodded gravely at each other and walked on.

From the tea house the drop to the village was steep and short. Through the one narrow street Robin followed Bianca, who, with amazing dispatch, was selling off her garden stuff. From the dark little houses which walled up the stony street, the women came with their baskets as soon as they heard the *clop, clop* of Tito's hoofs. Everybody knew Bianca; everybody wanted to buy from her. They looked curiously at Robin. She could hear them question Bianca.

"Who is she?" "Why is her hair like gold and her skin as brown as a Sicilian's?" "Is she a rich *turista?*" "Do they make her clothes to match her eyes?"

They examined her strapped sandals and fingered the blue linen of her frock. "She has the colors of *la Santa Vergine* on the church wall," said one old woman. "*Dio vi benedicta!*"

Robin began to feel very uncomfortable, but Bianca only laughed. "She is no saint," she informed them. "Could you but see her in her small pants—" she broke off, gleaming wickedly at Robin's imploring face.

Outside one door sat an old, old woman with her distaff. As she worked, she could look up and down the street. When she saw Bianca she smiled a toothless smile. "The worthless daughter of my worthless daughter," she mumbled pleasantly. "What have you brought us to-day?"

"For you there is nothing." Bianca produced a small package which she laid in her grandmother's lap. "But for my noble uncle the best of my garden."

"Your garden!" jeered the old woman. "*Mà!* It is good that we do not have to live on grass like Tito. Go to my cupboard and get some real food for your worthless selves." She opened her

package and Robin could see her eyes gleam almost like Bianca's at the tea which she sniffed suspiciously.

"She isn't as fierce as she sounds," Robin decided. But she felt almost as if another brigand had her when the old woman held her with a claw-like hand and peered into her face.

"She needs flesh on her bones," the grandmother decided. "No child of mine was ever starved thus. Give her some of the plunder which you have taken from my cupboard."

Bianca obligingly turned over to Robin three small crisp cakes which Robin found very good. "*Porco!* It is no wonder she is thin if you feed her like a sparrow." The old woman seized Bianca's dish of cakes impatiently and emptied it into the wide pockets on each side of Robin's frock. "There, go now. Your uncle is still at the shore with his fish. No day is long enough for him to finish his work! Here, Tito, a crumb for you for carrying the worthless grass!" and she held out some broken pieces of the cakes to the little donkey.

The three walked away contented, nibbling at their cakes. "She is a good grandmother," reflected Bianca. "Her tongue is not related to her thoughts."

Robin felt as if another brigand had her

At the shore they found the men sitting on the edges of their boats while they smoked over the events of the day's catch. Already the fish were drying in the hot sun along the edge of the beach. Robin did not like the smell and she was tired of being stared at. When Bianca, after a short conversation with a big brown man, announced that her uncle would take them now to the grotto, her only thought was relief at getting away. When they were well out from the shore she remembered Mrs. McGraw a bit guiltily. "But, after all, she would have hated it," she decided, "and she never, never would have gone anywhere in such a fishy boat." She waved a hand at Tito who, tied to a boat mast on the beach, was hee-hawing mournfully at their departure.

To Robin the water seemed pretty rough, but since no one else noticed it she decided that it must be all right. Anyway she liked it. The quick slap of the wave, the sharp tilt of the boat in response; she had to hold the edges of the seat with both hands to keep from rolling into its fishy bottom.

She could see the grotto now, a dark cave under the rocks which they were approaching. "Tell her to bend her head now," boomed the big uncle's voice. Robin obeyed so promptly that he

laughed. "So she knows our tongue," he commented. "*Bene!*"

The rocks of the entrance hung down so low that Robin could not see how they would ever get under them. Suddenly on the down slope of a great wave they swept into the cave. Robin sat up, rocks, fish scales, smells forgotten.

How could this blue magic be real? The very air was blue! And shining as if a blue light filtered through it! The walls looked as if they were made of blue stone. And the water! Clear blue to the very bottom. Robin put her fingers into it and looked at them to see if they were stained blue.

The uncle's laugh boomed out, the first sound in the eerie quiet. "The color is fast," he assured her.

Robin sat very still, a small blue figurehead in the bow of the boat. She felt as if she were bathed in lovely blue light, as if it poured over her and under her. Its beauty made her shiver. It made her feel a queer ache, a longing to capture its color with colors of her own. "Father could," she thought. "But I can't. Not yet. Not for a long time. I'd better learn to draw first."

Just then the boat swung gently around in the silence and she looked out toward the entrance. As she looked a great blue wave rolled up and

completely filled the hole through which they had come. The boat lifted on the swell, she caught a glimpse of daylight, and then again the entrance was filled with the high wall of blue water.

Robin heard the uncle whistle softly, and mutter something to Bianca about how she had teased him like a horse fly when he knew better. Bianca's eyes were big and black in the blue shadows. She looked almost frightened, though Robin could not believe that anything would really scare Bianca.

Another big blue wave filled the entrance, then another. And no daylight came between waves. A solid wall of water kept it out.

The uncle, who had been standing in his boat watching the opening, suddenly looked very fierce. "Lie down flat!" he commanded, and when Robin hesitated to stretch out on the fish-scaled bottom of the boat, "Flat! *Zitto, zitto!* Do as I say!"

Robin slipped down beside Bianca who tried to protect her from the slime with her own skirt. "Never mind," whispered Robin. "Are we really in danger?"

"Boats have had to wait until the wind dropped," Bianca sounded gloomy. "But my uncle has skill. We shall see. Perhaps I should not have urged him."

Robin knew that it was only for her sake that

Bianca had wanted the uncle to take them to the grotto. She snuggled up more closely to her.

"I would never be afraid with you," she said trustfully.

Bianca groaned. "I bring you nothing but trouble, my Tito and I. The old one will never forgive me now!"

"Well," said Robin, lifting her head so that she might peer over the edge of the boat, "you always get me out of trouble, don't you?" But what Robin saw in her brief glimpse made her feel pretty sure that neither Bianca nor any one else could get her out of this trouble.

The water was surging back and forth with a queer, low roar. The quiet blue of the cave seemed splintered into fragments which moved restlessly about. Nothing was still, except the great figure of the uncle which knelt motionless in the bottom of the boat watching with unwinking stare the surging blue flood. Suddenly he gave a mighty push with his oar and flung himself flat.

Robin shut her eyes, her whole body tightened to receive the blow of the wave. Then she heard a triumphant roar and opened her eyes to blink into the clear sunshine of the open sea. The uncle was looking very masterful as he swung the boat

The uncle was looking very masterful

out of the trough of the waves, and Bianca was laughing excitedly.

"Ah, but he is strong, my noble uncle! He is skilled!" she cried. "He knows how to escape the traps which the wicked sea sets for us!" Then as if the wicked sea reminded her, she pelted him with rapid questions about the devil mountain.

The uncle looked none too pleased to have the conversation shifted from his skill and heroism to the doings of a volcano. "Danger, yes," he pronounced with a mighty stroke of the oars. "Always there is danger in this country. If not from one thing, from another. But you have only to come to me, you and your mother, and I will attend to everything. You, too," he turned to Robin, "I will protect you from the evil work of our mountain. You shall never come to harm in our country while I am here." He sat erect and massive, and rowed very hard.

"*Grazie! Grazie!*" Robin nodded her bright head at him in thanks. He did look powerful, but she wasn't at all sure that he could manage a volcano. Still it was a comfort to know that he would try.

Bianca, however, was less impressed. She must know exactly what to tell her mother about the

chances of trouble. Had she not come down to Mero for that purpose?

The uncle stopped rowing and swept his arm in an arc across the clear sky. "Tell my sister to cease her foolish imaginings. Has she not eyes and a nose? Can she not see for herself that there is no smoke or fire in the air? But because she is a widow and has no man to look out for her, she is helpless, my poor sister! Now *my* mother——"

"I take very good care of my mother, too," Bianca broke in. "I bring her food from my garden, and money to buy linen for the embroidery she sells. We ask no help——"

"You do very well. You do very well. *Si, si,* for a girl you do very well," the uncle agreed. "But when it comes to danger one needs a man. Now I——"

"But *is* there danger? That is what I must know," Bianca persisted.

The uncle beached the boat and held out his hand to help Robin ashore. "Did I not tell you? And who should know better than one who has lived his life in the shadow of the devil mountain? It is finished. Speak no more about it."

Bianca subsided into a gloomy grumble. "In the shadow perhaps. But you cannot see its peak from your Mero. Though the wind has blown

away the smoke it still pours out. We shall see."

"*Peste!* You are indeed the horse fly!" The uncle untied Tito and passed the halter over to Bianca. "Your very donkey should kick and bite to hear you buzz!" He laughed good-naturedly and stalked off down the beach, leaving the girls to climb back to the road.

Bianca recovered her spirits at once. "It is what my mother would like to hear. And if the mountain should begin its evil work, I would take care of her anyway. Now we must hurry or that old one will have worse to say than our mountain."

Robin followed thoughtfully after Bianca and Tito. So Bianca had a widowed mother to support! This girl who was not so much older than herself! And not a word had she said about it. No wonder Robin always felt that she could depend on Bianca when she was with her. No wonder Bianca would not allow Mrs. McGraw to order her around. Suddenly Robin felt very proud of Bianca.

"If there should be trouble," she said, "I should rather go to you than to your uncle."

Bianca considered. "Perhaps it might be better," she said.

As the girls reached the tea house, Mrs. Mc-

Graw leaned out from the porch and beckoned them. "I could see you on the road," she said, "and it was well I could or I should have been in a fine state. Tie the wee donkey and drink the tea I ordered for you."

At the table next to them, an Italian family was having early supper. Robin eyed the smoking hot dishes of *pasta sciutta*, the *ravioli*, the spaghetti on which the mother was dusting powdered cheese for the children. She sniffed at the good smells of olive oil and garlic and hot tomato. Then she looked at her cup of pale watery tea and sighed.

When she glanced up she caught Mrs. McGraw's eye. At once she bit into a tough muffin, but Mrs. McGraw had seen the longing look at the other table. "Tell her," she motioned toward Bianca, "to order the stuff for you. She knows its heathenish name. You might as well have your supper now, and then you can go straight to bed when you get home. Though what it will do to your digestion!"

Bianca brightened up a good deal when she heard that they were to have some real food. "One is hungry," she apologized as she attacked a mound of spaghetti, "after the climb and getting drowned."

Robin's startled glance at Mrs. McGraw brought an immediate demand for a translation. "It was just the grotto," she explained. "We got caught a little by the wind. But it was all right," she added hastily. "Bianca's uncle always knows exactly what to do. He got us out at once."

"Well, I should hope he did!" Mrs. McGraw sounded horrified. "If I had known that you went to that grotto! Didn't you hear me call after you not to go?"

"I thought you were saying good-by, until later." Robin's candid blue eyes looked at Mrs. McGraw over her plate of *ravioli.*

"And then you knew I wasn't," finished Mrs. McGraw grimly. "Your mother would never have done such a thing when she was your age."

Robin reflected. "She told me once how when she was a little girl—" then she broke off in amazement. Mrs. McGraw had removed her cup from the saucer and helped herself to a small square of *ravioli.* Bianca and Robin watched her in silence. With her teaspoon she broke it in two and tasted a bit gingerly. Her face was wry but determined. "Humph!" she said, and ate the rest of it. The girls looked quickly back at their plates and went on eating as if nothing had happened.

"Tell the old one when she asks that I can make it even better than this," murmured Bianca.

When they came out of the tea house, rested and refreshed, the shadows were long on the road and a cool fragrance sifted over the walls of the gardens. The muleteers going home to supper sang, and Bianca joined in with the queer tuneless chant. Robin sang, too, her voice trailing after the others, a high sweet echo. Then they heard a deep humming like bumble bees and knew that it was Mrs. McGraw. Robin slipped her hand in the big boned, rough one, and they marched on up the hill together.

At the gate they paused a moment for Robin to give the sleepy Tito a good-night pat. "Ask her," said Mrs. McGraw without looking at Bianca, "if she knows how they make those small dough cakes. We must get you fat one way if not another. And you seem to like the queer stuff."

Bianca nodded gravely. "*Bene!* Is it not as I said? Tell her that I will come in to-morrow on my way home and make them for *il pranzo*. And she herself will eat them with pleasure. When we are not looking."

Robin repeated part of the message, and Bianca went on down the hill, singing and pulling Tito

behind her. "There is nothing she cannot do," Robin thought. "Perhaps she will teach me."

The bed felt smooth and soft that night. Robin slept and slept. If the nightingales sang she did not hear them. If she dreamed she did not remember in the morning. She woke rested, with that feeling which she had almost forgotten that something nice was going to happen.

The *ravioli* at dinner was delicious. For a while Robin was afraid there would be none. Mrs. McGraw insisted upon so much washing that Bianca balked. "I did not come to take a bath," she said, "I came to cook. Tell the old one that I will wash no more."

"It is soon over with," pleaded Robin. "She makes me do it, too. See, we will scrub together," and she seized the nailbrush which Bianca had thrown down.

Mrs. McGraw watched like a hawk until none of Bianca's garden was left under her nails. Then she let her begin to cook. And she watched her just as sharply as Bianca's deft fingers moved swiftly, measuring, rolling, pinching. Robin flew at her every command. The whole kitchen seemed to be under Bianca's direction. "Unless they are good," she muttered, "it is the end. But if they please the old one she will eat of them and at

last this skeleton of a child will be permitted the food which will make her strong. They shall be good," she finished fiercely.

And they were. Mrs. McGraw tested one cautiously, then she slipped another on to her plate, and then the girls lost count. They were too busy to notice. But the platter was empty when the table was cleared. Mrs. McGraw grumbled about a ruined digestion and took a soda mint, but Robin saw her carefully writing down some directions which had *"Ravioli"* printed at the top. "Good!" she said to Bianca. "We shall have it again." Bianca nodded, pleased.

CHAPTER VIII

SAINT AGNES HERSELF

FOR a few days the sky kept its pure blue. The water sparkled and Tito's small hoofs pranced mornings when he went by to the garden. Robin had been getting up earlier so that she might be out at the gate when Bianca went past. It was almost always possible to find some reason why she must stop in on her way home. And Mrs. McGraw did not seem to mind. She even thought up a reason or two herself.

Bianca had been greatly pleased with the sketch of the sleepy Tito. She would hold it in her hand and smile over it while she told Tito what a good-for-nothing donkey he was. Robin wanted to give it to her, but somehow she could not let it go. It seemed like a little piece of herself. It had been her own discovery. Her first one, she thought.

Bianca was bringing about miracles in Mrs. McGraw's garden. After her own hard day's work, she would bend over the pale plants, fertilizing, loosening the earth, watering, until even

Mrs. McGraw watched them change with grudging amazement. Tito, for safety, was tied outside, beyond reach of the vegetables. There he dozed, and there Robin, seated by the kitchen garden gate where she could talk to Bianca, made sketches of him for Bianca who dashed from her work in swift little trips to see how they were getting along.

"A great waste of time," pronounced Mrs. McGraw. "The bairn would be better off weeding."

Bianca flared when Robin unwillingly translated the reason for Mrs. McGraw's grumbling. "*Mà!*" she cried, "does the old one not know that it is hands like ours that must weed?" She spread hers out beside Mrs. McGraw's. "While yours are left free to make beauty? But such wisdom belongs to my race, not hers! A fat carrot for her!" And she pulled up one and presented it to Mrs. McGraw with a bow.

Bianca's gestures made her meanings only too clear, and Robin sometimes felt like a tennis ball tossed between them. But she kept on with her sketches while their storms gathered and broke, and usually at the end of the day every one seemed satisfied. Bianca had her sketch, Mrs. McGraw had a good piece of gardening done,

and Robin had a queer kind of happiness which she had never known before. As for Tito, he had had a nap.

One morning Robin found it hard to get up early. The air felt heavy on her eyelids and made them wish to stay shut. She yawned but still could not seem to get air enough to breathe. When she looked out of her window the sea was in a soft haze. Even the garden beneath her seemed misty and unreal. She took so long in dressing that she knew it was too late to go down to the gate. The day seemed started all wrong.

"It's the wind again out of the south," said Mrs. McGraw. "Now we'll breathe smoke instead of air. What a country!"

Lunch was not a success. Mrs. McGraw had tried to make the *ravioli* but even Robin could not manage the soggy, dreary pile on her plate. They sat there in the cool, darkened room, frowning at their plates when Bianca burst into the hall. Mrs. McGraw rose hastily and met her at the door before Bianca's sharp eyes should see the platter.

But Bianca was too excited to heed food. "I am on my way back to Mero," she cried. "My mother says she cares nothing for what my uncle says. She must be near the sea where she can get

away from the devil mountain. She will trust herself in the village no longer." Bianca nodded wisely. "It is better that she should go away where she cannot see it glare at night with its evil eye. Last night—*Mà!* How it rumbled and shot out its flames! My mother did not lie on her bed all night." Bianca's eyes looked dark and heavy-ringed as if she had not slept much herself.

"Pooh!" said Mrs. McGraw. "There is no danger. That volcano stopped working long ago like the rest of Sicily. It smokes just to make us uncomfortable. Is anything else the matter with the girl?"

"Well, yes," said Robin, "there is. She needs some one to lead Tito with the box of household goods while she takes care of her mother. Please, Mrs. McGraw, she has done so many things for us. Couldn't I please just walk down the hill with Tito? We will come right back without stopping for anything."

Mrs. McGraw looked doubtful. "It is a simple, straight way. I've been on it myself. And her mother is along. Could you keep away from the heels of that donkey?"

"I'll stay at his head end," Robin was ready to promise anything. Bianca was watching them

anxiously. If she could only do something for Bianca now!

"Well," Mrs. McGraw consented doubtfully. Bianca caught the note of consent. Her eyes and teeth gleamed. "Tell the old one," she said, "that when I return I will make a large dish of *ravioli* for us all." But Robin, looking back at the lunch table, thought best not to repeat this promise.

"I should like to wear my shorts," said Robin. "They are much cooler than a dress."

"Never mind that," said Mrs. McGraw, "if you go, you are going to look respectable. Put on a clean blue linen frock and I will brush your hair."

Robin hurried for the blue linen. What if she should change her mind! While Bianca stood impatiently at the door, Mrs. McGraw brushed Robin's hair into a smooth gold cap. "You should be wearing a hat this hot day," she grumbled, "but since your mother said so, I suppose you can go without. Some day you'll get a sunstroke. There, begone with you!" And they were off.

The road down to Mero was white with heat and dust. Bianca made Robin walk ahead with Tito so that she would not get the dust from the mule which she had borrowed for her mother. The mother was a timid little creature who clung

to the mule, reaching out now and then to seize Bianca's sturdy shoulder. She would not allow Bianca to move from the side of the mule. Robin understood now how necessary it was for Bianca to have help on this trip. Even through the heat and dust she liked the feeling that Bianca had come to her.

There was no danger from Tito's heels to-day. He minced along reluctantly as if he could think of a good many pleasanter things to do than this. When Robin twisted gay anemones into his harness, he did not pay even the attention of a nip at them. His head drooped, his eyes half closed, he seemed so nearly asleep that Robin touched him with the switch every now and then for fear he would lie down as he had on the staircase.

It was a quiet walk. Except for a little shriek from the mother when the mule jerked her, and the shrill, hot note of the cicadas, the road was silent. Everything seemed half asleep like Tito. When they reached the village the same curious quiet hung over it. The narrow street was empty except for a dog or two and a goat. The doors of the houses were closed. Robin could hear the mother behind her moaning something about how every one had fled to safety and left her to be buried by the devil mountain. Bianca looked un-

easy but she called to Robin to go ahead with Tito to her uncle's house. She must tighten her mother's saddle even though it was not loose.

Just as the crooked little street made a sudden turn which brought her opposite the church, Robin heard a burst of music and the church doors were flung wide open. Bianca had not yet come around the corner. Robin stood perfectly still, her hand on Tito's bridle, the sun beating down on her fair head. Perhaps it was a wedding or funeral. She must not stir until the people were out. Tito was always glad enough to wait.

At the head of the procession walked the black-robed priests chanting. Then came one in a scarlet robe carrying a copper tray on which sat a small wax image. Behind poured all the villagers, spreading out over the church steps, eyes intent on the priest with the image. Would they come toward her, and if they did, what should she do with Tito to get him out of the way?

Just then the priests swerved and saw her standing in the sun at the end of the dark little street, a still blue figure with a gold crown of hair beside a stone quiet donkey. The chant stopped, the priests and the people behind them fell on their knees. Robin could hear a tremulous murmur of "The little Saint Agnes, herself!" "The

child, Agnes, with her small *asino* beside her!" "Save us, save us, keep us safe!"

Robin felt her knees trembling. Whatever had happened now! Then she heard Bianca's voice behind her. "They believe that you are a vision. Be careful, or they will be angry when they find that they are fooled. Do not laugh!"

Robin had never felt farther from laughing. What should she do to show them that she was not a saint without making them angry? Already they had risen and were eyeing Bianca suspiciously. They knew that she was no saint. Robin managed a shaky smile, and feeling Tito's anemones under her fingers, grasped a handful of them and held them out to the crowd. The trusting gesture and the uncertain smile seemed to touch them, and with quick change of mood they called greetings to her, human greetings.

"They have decided that you are a good omen," said Bianca. "*Bene,* you must go with them. Do not refuse. Alas, alas! If they could but have seen you in small pants, we should not have had all this trouble! And the old one will never believe that the delay is all her own fault."

Robin still hesitated, confused. "What must I do? Why am I an omen? You come, too, Bianca. They know you."

"Only too well," agreed Bianca. "No, I am no omen. You must go alone. It is the Saint Agnes procession which marches up toward the mountain. They will ask the good saint to keep them safe and then they will come down again. It is nothing. We shall be there, my mother and I. She would not let it go without her. But you must march ahead with the priests."

The procession was bearing down upon them. "Tito?" gasped Robin, "am I to take Tito?"

"But surely," nodded Bianca. She said something rapidly to the nearest priest. "When they pass my uncle's door they will leave Tito's box within and you may ride him. I have told them that you are *fragile!*"

It was not a long ride. When they reached the brow of the hill where they could see the peak of the mountain, the priest in scarlet held up his little wax saint and they made their prayers. Robin watched the mountain, veiled and dark in its own smoke, and thought that it should heed these poor people and leave them in safety. Yet she remembered the black lava field that her father had shown her, and did not wonder that they were afraid. Was it possible that Mrs. McGraw might be mistaken? The mountain did not look lazy to-day. As she watched, a dull

flame lit up the smoke even in the sunshine. She shuddered.

But the people of Mero were satisfied. Had they not had a vision? Or if not a real vision, a good omen? They turned lightheartedly back and came down the hillside, laughing and chatting. The priest tucked the little Saint Agnes back into her niche, and no one paid any further attention to Robin.

As soon as the uncle had seen Bianca's mother in the crowd, he had taken charge of her. He led her on her mule up to his house where the grandmother had stayed in bed and said her prayers to her own little image of Saint Agnes.

"You did well to come to me," he assured them. "Now when the great eruption comes, I shall be here to save you. You, too, Bianca, and the small *Agnese*, you shall stay under my protection."

Bianca looked alarmed. "Indeed, my uncle, I remember your words of wisdom when we came before. I believe, as you do, that it is all foolish imaginings."

The uncle looked undecided. How could he insist upon protection, and at the same time stand by his own words? Bianca took advantage of his hesitation.

"Besides I must return the mule which I have borrowed to bring my mother. And the little *Agnese* must not alarm the good woman who cares for her." She began to move down the street, drawing Tito and Robin after her. "But we will return, my uncle, we will return at once if the devil mountain flares too much. We know how safe we should be with you!"

The uncle looked pleased and pretended not to hear the cracked voice from the bedroom within: "She knows how to take care of herself, that daughter of my worthless daughter. She needs no help from you."

Bianca laughed and hurried away. "I am your own daughter, *madre mia*," she called back, and was rewarded by a cackle from within.

"You *are* much more like your grandmother," reflected Robin. "Now she is old, but once she must have made people do as she wished just as you do."

Bianca's eyes gleamed. "And does she not now? *Mà!* That grandmother!" but she seemed well satisfied about something.

Out of the village the climb began. Robin had forgotten the heat and the heavy air while she had been led up the hill by the chanting priests. She had felt almost like part of a great spirit

which was sweeping up against the smoking mountain and holding back its evil work. But now the excitement dropped away from her. She was tired, so tired that she could hardly drag her dust-filled sandals over the hot road beneath them. The thick air made her cough again. The high walls on each side of the road seemed to catch and hold between them the dust of a pair of white oxen rambling along ahead.

"We must pass these lumbering creatures," decided Bianca. "If you will not ride Tito because he pretends to be weary, you shall mount the big mule. Up with you! He does not know how to walk without a load."

Bianca half lifted, half shoved Robin up on the mule's back. It felt very high up there, and a bit unsteady. But Robin remembered how much trouble Bianca had already had reassuring the mother, and held to the reins in silence. Past the oxen she would have slipped to the ground again, but Bianca pushed her back into the saddle.

"It was trouble enough to get you up there," she grumbled. "Now stay!"

Robin glanced sidewise at her. "Very well, grandmother," she said, and Bianca laughed.

They looked longingly at the cool, green-vined porch of the tea house as they passed. A little

way beyond, Robin suddenly thrust her hand into one of the deep pockets of her frock. She remembered that, as they hurried off, Mrs. McGraw had thrust something into her pocket, muttering about how you never could tell when you might need it.

"*Bene, bene,* Bianca, some *lire* for lemonade!" she waved a small purse, and pulled the mule's right rein so hard that he whirled straight into Tito's nose. Out flew Tito's heels. Half asleep as he was, he would take no insult. When Bianca had quieted him she looked ready for refreshment. It had been a long, hard day for her. She wiped her face with her sleeve, and dragged Tito into the shade.

"*Limonata* for us," she panted, "and a small bottle of red wine for the donkeys. Are there *lire* enough?"

Robin looked doubtful. "*Lire* enough," she held out the open purse. "But what will you do with red wine for the donkeys?"

"Pour it down their throats," said Bianca briefly.

And she did. A little for Tito, and more for the big mule. They both seemed to like it, and Tito at once held up his head and looked about him briskly. Bianca slumped into her chair at the table and grasped the cool glass of lemonade

gratefully. "It is good for them when they are tired," she explained. "We always give it to them in our country. You shall see how gayly they will climb with us now."

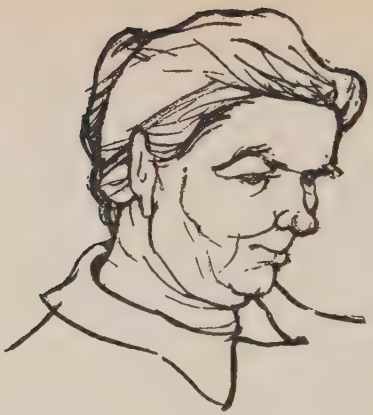
The rest in the shade and the cool drink seemed to set them all up. Robin felt very grateful to Mrs. McGraw for remembering the money. "I shall tell her how it helped us to get home," she thought, "though perhaps I'd better leave out the part about the donkeys. I don't believe that Scotch horses drink red wine."

The rest of the way seemed short. At the gate Bianca took Robin's place on the big mule and led little Tito by her side. He pranced a bit as they left, and stretched his neck for a hee-haw which Bianca cut short by a sharp twitch of the halter. "*Grazie!*" she called back to Robin. "*Grazie, grazie!*"

Robin walked slowly back under the green arch of the lime trees. The garden smelled cool and fresh. The long shadows rested her eyes after the glare of the road. At the kitchen entrance Mrs. McGraw met her. A savory odor came through the open door. Robin suddenly realized that she was very hungry. Porridge never smelled like this!

Mrs. McGraw bustled back into the kitchen.

"There is warm water for your bath," she said, "and a dish for your supper that I am not ashamed of." She lifted the cover of the copper pot and Robin caught a glimpse of macaroni bubbling gently in a sauce as smooth as Bianca's own. It *was* good to get home again!



Growley

CHAPTER IX

A DARK OUTLOOK FOR ROBIN

THE next day the sky had a yellowish haze and in the air was a curious sulphury smell which made Robin cough until Mrs. McGraw looked uneasy. "In Scotland we cure whooping cough with sulphur fumes, so it can do you no harm. But I don't care for the sound of it."

Robin did not like the feeling of it, either. She had coughed herself awake so many times in the night that she had no energy for the day. And the day had no energy to give her with its close, hot

air. She lay under the olive tree in the garden trying to read a small Italian storybook which her father had brought her from a shop in Florence. But reading Italian was quite different from speaking it. Robin's quick ear had caught so many of Bianca's phrases now that her speech had become quite Sicilian. Even Mrs. McGraw had picked up a few words from hearing them so often. As for Bianca, though she apparently did not listen to them, she surprised them now and then with a whole English phrase. Altogether the question of talking was no longer troublesome. But when it came to reading, Robin yawned and fell asleep under the tree half a dozen times while she waited for Bianca and Tito.

She closed the book with relief when Mrs. McGraw appeared with a letter in her hand. "It's from your mother," she said, "and I hope she'll soon be able to come back and bide in her own house." She dropped the letter into Robin's lap and stalked back to the kitchen, looking very warm and cross.

Robin tore open the envelope, and leaned back comfortably to enjoy her letter. Grandfather Robin, after whom Robin was named, was much better; they might leave earlier; and—what was this? She sat up straight.

> We heard the other day about a very good school in America which I think may be just the place for you next year. We shall probably go to America for the summer anyway, and we could leave you there when we come back to Florence. You mustn't mind, darling. Even your father thinks that it would be better for you. Copying everything that he does will never make an artist of you. You see that, don't you, Robin? But there will be plenty of time to talk about it when we come back——

and then more about the return and Grandfather which Robin hardly read. At the end was a postscript:

> Father says if you have made any sketches since he left, to send all of them along for him to see at once. But you mustn't feel bad if you haven't any, Robin. He really doesn't expect them.

School! America! Not to go to Florence when she was just beginning to realize some of the things she needed to know about her drawing! She could go to school, too. Had father forgotten about the governess he had promised, or even the English school in Florence? She would work so hard! Oh, it must be that he, too, believed that she had no talent, that she could only copy what he did.

Well, maybe he was right. Think of that awful sketch of the castle which looked like a train wreck. If father had been there so that she could have watched him instead of the castle, she might have drawn it. And then, she caught herself up quickly, whose sketch would it have been? Yes, he was right!

Her lazy content with the day was gone. That postscript! What had she to send father? When he said *all* of them, he meant all of them. The castle—she would have to write under it what it was—those silly drawings of Tito, and the back view of the baby. Lotta had the other picture of him.

"I wish Bianca had taken the Tito sketches home the way Lotta did," she thought. "Then I wouldn't have to send them, either. I wouldn't mind showing them to him if he was here. But I don't want him laughing at me in Scotland."

But father didn't really expect any sketches. He knew she couldn't do anything without him to show her. That was the worst of all. Wasn't there something that she could draw right now so that it could be mailed with the rest to-night? The villa! She might try the villa. She had heard father say that it had nice lines.

Robin sat on a rock and tried the villa. It

seemed enormous, and had almost as many parts as the castle. And while it was a very good villa, it looked like a worse ruin than the castle, Robin thought, when she finally gave it up.

"It will have to go with the others, too," she thought gloomily. "All of them, he said. I wish I hadn't tried it!"

Robin wrote, THE VILA. JUST TERIBEL, under her ruin and took it in to Mrs. McGraw who was not sympathetic. "All nonsense, anyway," she grumbled, but she tied the sketches up and put stamps on them for collection. Robin felt very much dejected, and wished that Bianca would not be so late on a murky afternoon when everything went wrong.

Still Bianca and Tito did not come. Robin wandered restlessly back and forth as far as the gate. Then she went to the kitchen door. "They are not coming," she told Mrs. McGraw. "Do you suppose that Bianca has gone to Mero to stay with her uncle?"

"From what you told me of him, I judge not," said Mrs. McGraw.

"Wouldn't you like to see how the volcano looks this evening?" suggested Robin.

Mrs. McGraw shut the oven door and wiped

the perspiration from her face. "I never wanted to see it less," she said.

Robin turned back into the garden, then down to the gate again. "Well, I should like to see it very much," she said aloud as if Mrs. McGraw were there. And she walked out of the gate and down the road. "It's not so far as Mero, and I have been there many times. I can get back before supper."

A curious feeling of depression seemed to hang over everything. The leaves drooped on the trees, the peasants that Robin passed kept their eyes on the ground and trudged heavily along. The small boy in shorts slipped by in the smoky dust like a swift little ghost.

Bianca's place looked deserted. "I will stop on my way back," she thought and hurried on to the end of the village. Scattered groups of people stood watching the volcano listlessly. Robin could not tell whether they were alarmed or not. But as she watched she felt a great fear shake her into the same silence. What could one do against that terrible, burning mountain? Smoke had covered it with a dark screen, but as she watched, it roared and shook out a flare of red flame. Down the side she could see a snaky, bright streak of

lava. What if it should come on and on, creeping into their very garden paths just as she had dreamed it might. She turned and fled. If only she could find Bianca!

At the stone stairway she halted, shaken by a fit of coughing. Instantly the door flew open above her. "But it is you!" cried Bianca, "and trying to talk to Tito in his own language!"

Robin laughed and wiped away the tears. She had managed a small whoop which did not sound unlike Tito's hee-haw. "It is the smoke," she gasped. "My cough was almost gone."

Bianca had her by the shoulders, urging her up the stairs. "You shall rest a moment." She looked back over her shoulder, and down at Robin's shorts. "You go forth often without the old one nowadays," she observed.

Robin nodded. "Yes, I must hurry back. But, Bianca, I have seen the volcano. What is it going to do to us?"

Bianca shook her head grimly. "Who can tell? But do not fear. You are safe in *il villa*. A long arm of the sea lies between you and the devil mountain. None of its evil works can touch you." She drew Robin, whose shoulders had stopped trembling, under her arm, through the door into a dark little hall. "First you shall greet *Tito mia*."

She led Robin down some narrow dark steps into a small basement. It is no wonder, Robin thought, that Tito did not mind the villa staircase. There under a barred window, with a pile of clean straw beside him, stood Tito. He thrust his cool nose into her hand and she fed him a piece of grimy sugar from the bottom of her pocket. The volcano with its ugly threats seemed very far away. So this was where Tito lived when he walked through the door on the stairs. And Bianca, what about her?

As if she read Robin's thought, Bianca led her up the narrow stairs again. "It is not a villa where I live," she said, "but it serves my purpose as well. Only now it is empty as a gourd without my mother."

Two small rooms they had. Robin thought of the big echoing corridors and room of the villa, and wished that she could live like this. Two small rooms, and piled on a table in one of them a basket of freshly dried clothes.

"My washing," explained Bianca. "I could not stop to see you to-day because I had to wash. When my mother is not here, there seem many things to be done," she sighed.

Robin was looking about her thoughtfully. All of those big rooms at the villa. Bianca alone

here in this empty little gourd of a house. What would Mrs. McGraw say? Bianca was very proud. And there was no question about it, Mrs. McGraw would not be very much pleased at the way Robin had walked off without telling her. She considered. Well, she would ask Bianca.

"I suppose," said Robin slowly, "that Mrs. McGraw is not going to like it very much because I took my walk alone to-day."

"Will she beat you, that old one?" broke in Bianca angrily.

"Oh, no!" Robin laughed, and Bianca looked relieved. "But can you think of anything we might do that would take her mind off it a little?"

Bianca frowned at her basket of clothes in deep thought. "This is what we shall do," she settled the question once and for all. "I shall go with you and I will take her this basket of lettuce which I had picked to sell to-morrow morning. No, we will not talk about it. We will go. Now, at once!"

"Shall we take Tito?" asked Robin. If Bianca was going to stay at the villa, and perhaps Mrs. McGraw would invite her, she might as well bring Tito first as last.

Bianca slung the basket on her arm. "Oh, no. We do not need his help and he needs his sleep.

He must work hard to-morrow. Yes, Stephano," she stopped to speak to a stout little man who was just coming up her steps, "yes, I have decided. You may borrow my Tito to-morrow while I am in Mero. But do not work him too hard in your field. And if you beat him but once, but *once* I say, I will," she frowned fiercely at the little Sicilian, "I will call *il polizia* and put you in jail. Is that clear to your understanding?"

Stephano pounded his chest and looked equally fierce. "Such care will I take of the small donkey that he will be two inches larger when you return. As for the work that I give him to do," he reached down and made a gesture of lifting something precious in his arms, "I will carry thy Tito if he wearies!"

Bianca stalked down the stairs. "See that you do," she said.

"He would not beat a fly," she added to Robin, "else I would not lend him my Tito."

As they neared the villa Robin felt more and more doubtful about the value of her plan. It would take more than lettuce to placate Mrs. McGraw. "I shouldn't have gone away without telling her," thought Robin. "She will be very angry and I don't blame her." If Bianca was going to Mero to-morrow, she could not stay

with them anyway. Another day alone with nothing to think about but those awful sketches on their way to father, and the volcano so near and terrible. Depression shut down over her again.

"Must you go to Mero again, Bianca?" she asked.

"I have promised my mother." Here they were at the gates. "I shall iron her clothes to-night and take them to her."

"Perhaps you would like my help in carrying them down the road," suggested Robin hopefully. If Mrs. McGraw was going to be cross, she certainly would like another trip to Mero.

"*Grazie, non.* The clothes have no weight. And I must visit in my family to-morrow. Else they will make me come down there to stay."

This was final. Robin saw that she would only be in the way. Well, perhaps Mrs. McGraw would forget by to-morrow. Here she was, looking very warm and tired. And frowning, not at her, but at Bianca.

"I might have known that you had taken her off with you! Have you no sense at all! In all this heat and smoke! And her with a cough like that!"

Robin was coughing so hard that she could not speak for a moment. With a little whoop, she

finished just in time to see through her tears that Bianca had her face close to Mrs. McGraw and that she was talking very rapidly and angrily to her. Though neither knew exactly what the other said, the understanding seemed complete, for Bianca, her lettuce under her arm, whirled about and ran through the gates down the road.

When Robin, still panting from her cough, started after her, Mrs. McGraw seized her by the arm. "You'll stay right here, my girl, where I can see where you are. The madder that girl is, the better I like it!"

Robin wrenched her arm away. "Well, I don't," she cried. She looked fearlessly up into Mrs. McGraw's scarlet face. "Bianca is my friend. And she never did take me off with her, I went by myself. And she came back with me. And she brought you some lettuce." Suddenly it seemed too sad that Bianca should be running home with her basket of lettuce, and Robin burst into tears. "And she's a-a-all a-a-alone down there!" She sank down on the grass and buried her face in her knees.

Except for Robin's sobs, there was silence. Mrs. McGraw stood looking down on the rumpled gold crown. Then she eased herself on to the grass and put an arm around the shaking shoulders.

"Weel, weel, my bairn," her voice was gruff. "I could not know that. It is the heat and the smoke that has got into all of us."

Robin understood that this was an apology. She lifted wet eyes. "No, you couldn't," she admitted. "I was to blame and no one else." Her eyes brimmed again. "And now she has gone with her nice present!" Mrs. McGraw's arm seemed near and comfortable, and Robin tucked her face down into its crook.

Mrs. McGraw groaned. "All this fuss for a young heathen with a sharp tongue! Did you not say that she was alone down there? Well, ask her to come up here until her mother comes back. How's that?"

Robin's head flew out of its shelter. "Would you really let her, Mrs. McGraw? I was going to ask you because her house was an empty gourd. I should not have gone without telling you. I shouldn't have done it."

"Indeed you shouldn't," agreed Mrs. McGraw, "and with your shorts on, too. A nice spectacle you are! Come in and get a bath. Between the streaks of smoke and tears—weel, weel!"

After supper in the cool of the evening they sat in the garden and talked about how they should get Bianca back again. Over toward the moun-

tain the sky glowed red and then dark. Now and then they heard a deep roar, and even the garden was lighted by the sudden flare which followed it. The flowers looked pale and unreal in the lurid light, and when they dropped back into the darkness again, Robin put her hand down to be sure that they were still there. Nothing seemed quite real in a stillness where even the nightingales had forgotten to sing.

"When the girl comes in to-morrow, we will tell her that she is to stay," said Mrs. McGraw.

"She will not come in to-morrow." Robin knew how angry Bianca must have been at the injustice. "Nor any other day."

"Then she can stay away!" snapped Mrs. McGraw. "Hoity-toity! Let us go to bed. This country and the people who live in it would spoil the temper of a saint." She moved through the darkness toward the lighted doorway of the kitchen entrance. "And she's no saint!"

"Nothing is settled," thought Robin drearily, as she lay in bed watching the sky light up. "Bianca will not come again and I don't blame her. It was my fault, all of it. If I could only think of some way to get her to come back!"

Robin slept late the next morning. She was not even sure that it was morning when she awoke,

the room seemed so dim. She felt heavy and tired, and lay without moving until Mrs. McGraw came to the door. "Up with you!" she said. "It will rain to-day and then we'll all feel better."

Robin was sitting on the floor, pulling on a sock, when she suddenly put both hands flat on the rug to steady herself. In some curious way the floor had seemed to move under her. It gave her a queer, helpless feeling with nothing steady to grasp, the way she had felt when the handlebars of her bicycle had pulled out once and dangled in her hands until she fell off the wheel. She picked up her shoes and ran downstairs to find Mrs. McGraw sitting beside the kitchen table and looking about the room in a surprised kind of way.

"Hoot!" she said, "what next? I have an idea, my lass, that we had better be moving on if this is going to keep up. To-day I shall telegraph your mother that she can meet us in Naples."

Robin stood still in the doorway and looked at her. Leave Sicily? Not see Bianca and Tito again? That would be bad enough. But to leave Bianca angry, and to know that she would always be angry——

"When are we going?" Robin asked in a small, despairing voice.

"The sooner the better." Mrs. McGraw was serving breakfast in her usual competent way. "I'll get reservations for to-night's boat when I go down to telegraph."

"Are we coming back?" the voice sounded even smaller.

"Not if I know it," Mrs. McGraw set the porridge dish briskly on the table. "Your father and mother can do as they please. I've had enough of the place."

Robin sat down at the table aghast. To-night! And Bianca at Mero all day. That settled any chance of seeing her. She tried to swallow her oatmeal but it hurt her throat.

Mrs. McGraw looked at her sharply. "Don't be telling me that you want to stay in a place where the ground heaves up under you. And where there's not enough air to feed a fish! Who was it that was packing her bag to move out not so long ago?"

Robin stared miserably over her oatmeal into the garden where a whitish dust had settled over everything. No use trying to explain to Mrs. McGraw. And she would have to go anyway.

Mrs. McGraw hurried about the villa, Robin following her and getting in her way until she impatiently pulled the small traveling bag from

under the bed and bade her pack it. "There is much to do if we are to leave to-night. You'd far better be helping than hindering."

Robin folded her pajamas into the bag and remembered how she had tried to get away. "That was before I knew Bianca and Tito," she thought. "I don't suppose I'll ever have any one to play with again. Though Bianca doesn't play. She works."

After an early lunch Mrs. McGraw put on her hat and gloves, and taking her purse, started for the village. "I'll be back with the tickets in a short time," she promised. "The train goes about six, I think. Now run back and be taking your bath while I am gone," Robin had walked down to the gate with her, "and throw those shorts in the ragbag. You've a clean frock in your closet."

CHAPTER X

Avante, TITO!

ROBIN climbed on the gate post and watched her out of sight. While their own place seemed fairly light now, she could see that a heavy cloud of smoke hung over the hill where she and Bianca had climbed toward Sola. "I hope the ashes will not hurt Bianca's garden," she looked anxiously up the road. "She couldn't get along without her garden. Why, I believe that is the man who borrowed Tito." She slipped down from her post the better to see a roly-poly figure stumbling toward her through the dust. "Stephano, that was his name. I will ask him about Bianca's garden."

The little man was hurrying past, but Robin called to him, "Is the smoke thick on the hill?"

He halted, looked puzzled a moment at her Italian, and nodded violently. His face was dripping perspiration and his clothes were powdered white with ashes.

"But yes!" His eyes were round and black

above his ash whitened cheeks. "*Terrifico!* I run. I am shaken out of my garden like a ripe cherry out of a tree. I wait for nothing. I run!" and he started full speed down the road.

"But Tito," called Robin after him, "what have you done with Tito?"

"*Niente, niente,* nothing at all," he slowed up a moment. "Could I stop to go across the field for a small *asino* when the ground rose under my feet? But no, I run, I run!" And he disappeared into the haze.

Robin started to run after him distractedly. Then she stopped short. "He is not what I want," she thought, "it is poor Tito. Tito is up there in the ashes and smoke, waiting for him." Her thoughts scurried along. "Bianca isn't here. He's probably tied and can't come down by himself." She looked up the thick, dark road. "I shall have to go and get him."

Without stopping to go back to the house, she started up the long climb. "Bianca said that Stephano's garden was next to hers," she thought. "I think that I could find Bianca's again, though I couldn't see it from the path in this smoke."

The haze grew thicker as she climbed, and fine ashes sifted into her hair and eyes. She found the mule path without difficulty. She remembered

the almond tree where she had rested. It was here, its lovely blossoms gone, its leaves curled and pale. She shut her eyes and tried to see how Bianca had looked from here. She must locate the garden. "Across this field she was. Leaning against a pole. I am sure."

The ashes were sifting down faster, and now and then a small stone hit her bare head. It felt hot when she brushed it away. Somehow she seemed much nearer the volcano here than in her own sheltered garden. Now that she was over the brow of the hill, she felt entirely unprotected from it. She thought of the lava stream that had caught the little house. Could it catch her like that? No, she could run faster than it could creep. Still, people did get caught! But she must find Tito. No use getting scared until she had found Tito.

The climb through the thick air took her breath away, and soon she was coughing hard. It was almost as bad as the first days of the whooping cough. Across the field. There, this was Bianca's garden. Robin knew it by the poppies which Bianca had allowed to grow in one corner. "I have to feed my eyes as well as my stomach," she had said.

"Poor Bianca, what will she say when she sees them!" cried Robin.

The fine white ash had sifted over their petals until they looked grayish instead of scarlet. Robin tried to shake it off, but the petals fell instead. She looked around at the rest of the garden. All of its bright greens dulled into gray, its crisp vines and leaves hanging wilted. But she could not wait. Tito was more important than the ruined garden.

She tried to peer ahead of her to see Tito if she could. But everything ahead looked exactly as it did close to her, gray and murky.

"It seems as if I couldn't go much farther," Robin gasped, "and Stephano's garden may be straight ahead or on either side of Bianca's. I just know that it is near here."

She had reached the farther side of Bianca's rough wall. "The earthquake must have been worse up here," she thought. "All of these stones have rolled off. No wonder Stephano ran! But he should have stopped for Tito. Poor Tito, he must be terribly scared!"

Suddenly it occurred to Robin that there might be another of those terrifying earth shakings while she was up here on the mountain side all alone. If it could move rocks like this—she half turned to run while there was yet time. Then she faced about stubbornly. If she had come as far as this, she was not going back without Tito.

He was not in the first field. Robin trudged back through the cinders to Bianca's wall and started in another direction. Here the ground had been freshly plowed at one end. Robin followed the rough furrows, staggering with weariness. And down in the corner by Stephano's boundary wall, she found Tito.

He lay on the ground as gray and still as the plants on which he rested. Fear clutched Robin so that she could not move. Tito was dead! As she stood, motionless, staring at the little gray form on the ground, he opened one eye and looked at her. Then he closed it again.

Robin's knees, shaking with exhaustion and fear, bent under her and she sank down beside Tito. "You bad little donkey!" she cried. "You made me think you were dead."

Tito opened both eyes and looked at her reproachfully as if he were not to blame because any one was so foolish. Then he shut them up and went on with his nap. By the appearance of the vegetables around him, Robin judged that he had had a good lunch before he took his siesta.

"Get up, Tito!" cried Robin. For the first time she had thought of Mrs. McGraw. What would she say if she came back and found her off again! When there was so much to be done before they

could get away! And when she was supposed to be taking her bath and getting dressed. After yesterday's trouble too! "Well," thought Robin, "all I can tell her is that I *had* to get Tito. I didn't have time to think of anything else." She turned to the sleeping donkey. "And now look at him! The only thing he minds is being disturbed. *Avante,* Tito, *avante!*"

Tito did not flick an eyelash. Robin remembered the night on the staircase. She reached over the wall and broke a piece of brush. She had to switch Tito smartly on all four legs before he would pay any attention. When he finally lumbered to his feet, he staggered a little. Robin herself felt shaky and queer.

"It must be the sulphur in the air," she thought. "Poor Tito, he has been breathing it all the morning. I must get him away or he will lie down again."

Tito showed every sign of stopping to lie down again. Robin shook her switch at him. "Here I am, so tired coming after you that I can hardly walk. And now you want me to carry you home. Move on, Tito! *Avante!* We'll feel better when we get farther down."

Robin herself felt drowsy and heavy. If she could only mount Tito and ride the rest of the

"It is lucky that it is downhill," thought Robin

way! But she knew how quickly Tito would flatten out under a load. There was nothing to do but plod along through the cinders and ashes, and prod the little donkey into keeping up with her.

As they dropped down the road over the brow of the hill, the way became less difficult. "It is lucky that it is downhill," thought Robin, her eyes half shut. "I couldn't climb another step. *Avante,* Tito!"

Urging, pulling, stumbling, she dragged the little donkey down the hill through the gates, under the olive tree, where she tied him, though he had no idea of moving. There she sank down on the grass beside him. And there Mrs. McGraw found them both sound asleep, and as dusty gray as the ground, when she hurried in, half an hour later.

Robin hardly woke through a bath and going to bed. She heard Mrs. McGraw say something about getting no reservations because the trains could not run on twisted rails. "Good!" she thought, "now I may see Bianca again, and I can give Tito back to her. Then she will not be angry at us." She slept again.

The next morning Robin sat on the side of her bed and wondered what was the matter with her feet. She could not step on them without sharp

burning pain. When she tried to pull on her sock she gave it up at once. "They were all right yesterday," she thought, "when I walked such a long way." Then she remembered how the hot ashes and cinders had felt as she walked over them. And how the warm water of her bath had stung. "I must have burned them," she said aloud.

"It's no wonder," Mrs. McGraw had heard her as she entered. She picked up one small foot and examined the sole. "Blistered like paint in the sun," she announced. "You'll not be walking on those just yet." She disappeared and came back with a bottle of olive oil and some soft cloths.

When the feet were bandaged they felt better. But it was no use to try to step on them. How could she get to the village to tell Bianca that Tito was safe? Bianca would never come to the villa, and Robin knew by all the signs that Mrs. McGraw was in no mood to go after her. Her plans had gone askew. She was all ready to leave Sicily and now she must stay until repairs were made on the twisted rails. She was nervous and grumpy.

"It's bad enough to be caught here myself," she groaned, "but when I think about your mother if anything happens to you——"

"She worries about me," thought Robin re-

morsefully, "and I don't make it any easier for her by going off without telling her. Well, I can't get far away now."

The smoke grew no worse. The volcano rumbled several times during the day, and the fine ash continued to sift down. Tito remained peacefully in the garden, and Robin was touched at noon to see from her window Mrs. McGraw offer him an armful of clover from which she tried to shake the dusty coating.

The bag remained packed and the house had the air of being closed. Robin ate her meals in her room, wishing that Tito were there with her. It was lonely and she was unhappy about Bianca. She thought about her sketches and wished that the earthquake could have swallowed them up. The night was long in coming, and when it came it brought no sleep. Her feet hurt, and she had slept so much during the day that now she lay awake and watched the sky through her window grow lurid and darken into a blackness so thick that it pressed like a weight on her. The sound of the volcano deepened to a roar in the silence of the night. Robin tried to think of something pleasant to push back the terror that she could feel creeping over. It was no use. What was there pleasant to think about? Bianca gone, the moun-

tain threatening them, and no way to escape from it. Things seemed so much worse at night! Robin buried her head in the pillow where she could not see the sky flare and darken.

To her muffled ears came the thud, thud, of a nearer sound. Her heart seemed to fill her throat like a live, beating thing. Had the lava come? Was it crawling through the garden paths as she had dreamed? She threw off the pillow and sat up in bed. If she screamed, Mrs. McGraw would come after her. She braced her hands on the bed and drew a long breath. But just as she opened her mouth, she realized with her uncovered ears that this sound was nothing which a volcano could make.

Clop, clop, it came, nearer and nearer. At the landing it stopped and Robin heard a little snort. "Oh, my goodness, it's Tito," she cried aloud. "Come right here, you darling! Don't, *don't,* lie down out there! If I could only come after you!"

Tito apparently heard her voice and hesitated. But Robin did not hear the expected flop on the landing. Instead, *clop, clop,* the small hoofs climbed nearer and nearer. The door creaked and in a sudden red glare, Robin saw the little donkey strolling into the room. She held out her arms toward him in the darkness that followed.

"This way, Tito, this way. Right over here! Ah-h-h, here you are!" Tito's cool, soft nose rubbed against her arm. She put her cheek down on his silky ears and sighed. He felt so warm and alive and real. All the rest was a bad dream. All the terror disappeared as she whispered foolish things into the long ears.

Tito stood it as long as he could. *Thump* went his front knees, then his hind legs, and he was down on the floor beside the bed. He heaved a long sigh, and by his heavy breathing Robin knew that he was asleep. Lying close to the edge of the bed with her arm hanging down, she could touch his smooth neck. She smiled happily into the dark and fell into untroubled sleep.

Mrs. McGraw found them there in the morning, but to Robin's relief she did not scold. Instead she remarked, "Well, I wouldn't have minded, myself, last night if he'd been on the floor beside me. It was not a night for sleeping." She hesitated. "How would you like it, my lass, if I moved a small bed into my room for you?"

Robin drew a long breath. "Oh, yes, Mrs. McGraw! Oh, yes, I'd like it very much!" She remembered then how she had made her mother promise that she should keep her own room and be left alone at night. Mother finally promised

but she had not understood. She couldn't when she called Mrs. McGraw "Growley Darling." She couldn't know how grim her old nurse had looked to Robin. But now—well, now was different. There would be no more nights of terror.

The blisters were still there, but when Mrs. McGraw had put on fresh bandages they felt better. The smoke had lifted, too. Robin felt her spirits rising with it. A fresh breeze from the sea blew under it and tore it into ragged rifts. The still silver of the water broke like a shattered mirror.

"There's a bit of air to breathe anyway." Mrs. McGraw seemed less worried and edgy. "To-day we must get hold of the small donkey's mistress. It will be like her to blame us for kidnaping him if she finds him here." But Mrs. McGraw did not sound cross. "I will stop there when I go to the village this afternoon to see about our transportation."

When Mrs. McGraw returned she reported that it would be impossible to get away before the end of the week. "And by that time," she grumbled, "the eruption will be over, and we'll have no excuse for leaving."

Robin could wait no longer. "What did Bianca say?" she broke in eagerly.

"Oh, that girl?" Mrs. McGraw sounded casual, unconcerned. "Well, she wasn't there. The place was all closed up as if nobody had been around." She started out of the room.

"Mrs. McGraw," Robin's voice shook, "Mrs. McGraw, *what* do you suppose has happened to Bianca?"

"Oh, that girl! Why nothing could happen to her! Nothing at all. She has probably stayed to a christening down in Mero. Don't you worry about *her!*"

Robin stared out of the window. She was not even listening. "Bianca would have come back. She would never have left Tito. Perhaps she came yesterday and could not find him. Oh, Mrs. McGraw, where do you suppose she is!"

"Well, if you are going to worry like that, I suppose I'll have to find out. Though probably all I'll get is impudence for my pains. Now you stop fussing. Maybe I'll walk down toward Mero when I've had my tea."

Robin thought of Mrs. McGraw stumbling down that steep path. "Oh, you are good!" she cried. "But you just couldn't climb back that road!"

"Oh, I couldn't?" bristled Mrs. McGraw. Then she turned at a sound behind her. "Well, anyway,

I don't have to now. Here is your impudent friend." And she marched out of the door past Bianca who stared after her.

"So the old one is still in a fury," she said. "Much better to live with a volcano than her!"

"Bianca!" cried Robin. "Oh, Bianca, where have you been?" Then when Bianca turned her dark stare on her, "Why, what is the matter? Bianca, *what* has happened? You—you look sick!"

"Niente." Bianca shrugged her shoulders. "Nothing except that everything is finished. My garden is ruined—and so I have no bread." She swallowed hard and looked away from Robin. "My Tito is lost—and so I have no friend." Down went her proud head. *"Tito mia! Tito mia!"*

Robin forgot her blistered feet. She leaped at Bianca and pulled her to the window. Her throat was so choked that she could not speak, but she pointed down into the garden. Mrs. McGraw was just dusting off another load of clover while she pushed back Tito's outstretched head.

Bianca screamed. "A ghost! A small gray ghost! My Tito! How could it be my Tito when Stephano left him to die in the ashes!" She sprang

toward the door, laughing and crying. "Come, come!" she cried. *"Run!"*

"Go on! Go on!" Robin had curled her feet up in pain. "I can't walk——"

But Bianca's sudden frenzy of delight had given her the strength of ten. She seized Robin under the arms, hoisted her over her shoulder, and before Robin knew what had happened to her, she was under the olive tree beside Tito.

Bianca had the small donkey around the neck, half choking him. Tears were running down her cheeks, and she was murmuring Sicilian endearments into his long ears. But Tito, who had his eye on the clover, soon put a stop to all sentiment. "Hee-haw," he started in Bianca's ear, and she hastily loosened her grip. Tito buried his nose in the clover, and Bianca sat down beside Robin and wiped her eyes with her sleeve.

"It is no ghost, my Tito," she said. "It is the greedy *asinello* who is so worthless that no one—oh, but where did you find *Tito mia,"* she broke off, "where did you find him?"

"Just where Stephano had left him when the earthquake shock scared him. He was getting his sleep made up," Robin could laugh now. "I had to use a switch to make him move."

"It would have taken more than a switch if he had stayed there much longer," Bianca looked black. "Dead! That is what he would have been. My little mouse of a Tito! There is no switch long enough in the world to repay that Stephano—" Suddenly a new feeling seemed to rush in and destroy her fury. "But you!" she cried. "Your poor little feet! That is what has burned you! Going for my Tito!" She dropped on the ground and pressed her cheek against the bandages. "What can I do for you who have saved my Tito?"

Robin felt very much embarrassed. "Oh, my goodness!" she said. "Nothing. I liked getting Tito. And my feet just look queer with Mrs. McGraw's bandages. Oh, I know! Yes, there is something you could do." Bianca's face lit up. "You could please not be angry at Mrs. McGraw."

Bianca laughed. "I have no fury left in me beyond that which I need for that black fiend, Stephano. The old one has been driven out of my mind. That is how I came here. *Mà!* I had forgotten my anger."

Robin shook her head. These sudden changes in mood were beyond her. "She would have walked

to Mero for you if you had not come. And she has taken such good care of Tito!"

"Oh, the old one, she *is* good. And I—it is I who am the devil mountain, not she," Bianca was filled with remorse. "I will run to her and tell her so." And she ran off across the garden to the kitchen.

Robin waited. "They can't understand a word each other says," she thought. "But maybe it's better they shouldn't. The things they say sometimes!" She decided that she would never try to teach Mrs. McGraw Italian.

Apparently Robin was right. When Bianca came back, she had Mrs. McGraw with her. She was still talking earnestly and Mrs. McGraw seemed interested.

"What's this she tells me about her garden?" she asked. There was no mention of the quarrel.

Robin listened and interpreted sentence by sentence. "She says it is ruined, finished. That there is nothing more for her to do. She must go now to stay with her uncle because she and her mother must live. (Oh, poor Bianca, she hates it there!) And—my goodness, Mrs. McGraw, listen to this —she says that in her uncle's small house there is no room for Tito, and nothing for him to do. So we may keep him, keep him here!"

Mrs. McGraw looked aghast. "And who would take care of him, you might ask her? You with no feet," Robin cast a terrified look to see if they were still there, "and me so busy getting away from this heathen country. Yes, tell her that, tell her that we leave as soon as the trains will take us."

It was Bianca's turn to look downcast. She reflected a moment. "*Bene!* We can take but one day at a time. The volcano may swallow us all before those rails are straight." Mrs. McGraw glanced nervously over her shoulder. "Keep my Tito these few days then. Perhaps some one will buy him. But not," her eyes blazed through tears, "not that Stephano, that round little barrel empty of all save fear, that coward——"

"There, there," soothed Mrs. McGraw, "now she's mad again. Tell her to hold her peace. I canna think."

Bianca sulked, and silence hung over the garden. Tito finished his clover and stared over the wall. Robin watched him miserably. What was to become of him!

Mrs. McGraw broke the silence. "There's but one thing to be done. For the few days that we have left, the girl must stay here herself. She is in no hurry to get to her uncle's. And I don't know as

I'm blaming her. She may as well stay here where she can keep her donkey from walking up and down stairs all night. And if she has good luck, she may find some one to buy him."

The question settled, Mrs. McGraw walked off to her kitchen. Robin hugged her knees and rocked ecstatically back and forth. Bianca's eyes and teeth gleamed when she heard the solution. "To-day is to-day," she said, "and to-morrow is to-morrow. A place to stay, food to eat, and a little more air to breathe. What more could my Tito and I need?" She rose briskly. "I will now teach the old one the art of *ravioli.* She should know before she returns to the land of no food."

Robin shuddered. "It is good that they cannot understand each other," she thought. "If they could, we should have no *ravioli,* and no Tito."

She heard Mrs. McGraw's deep laugh from the house once or twice and decided that she need not worry. She must have fallen asleep, curled up under the olive tree. When she woke, Bianca and Mrs. McGraw stood before her, their hands locked in an arm chair to carry her into the house. The *ravioli* neither looked nor tasted like Mrs. McGraw's cooking. Yet she seemed able to eat it with relish. Things were going well so far.

CHAPTER XI

THE OUTLOOK CLEARS FOR ROBIN

BY afternoon the sun was shining through a fine white dust which made it look golden. There was no longer a smell of sulphur, and the rumbles of the volcano came farther and farther apart. Over the sea black clouds piled up, but Bianca viewed them without alarm.

"We shall have rain now," she prophesied. "Real rain. When it is too late to save my garden."

She was right. All through the night the sudden showers swept across the hillside. In the morning Robin looked down into a garden washed clean of the white dust that had coated it. Even the sea looked washed and blue again. She could breathe clear down into her lungs.

The blisters were better, too. If she walked slowly, she scarcely knew that they were there. No one was in the house, and she hurried through the breakfast set out for her. She found Bianca and Mrs. McGraw in the vegetable garden looking at the damage.

"It is good that you have come," Bianca greeted her. "Tell the old one what she should have learned by now, that she knows nothing about a garden in this country. She believes that the volcano has ruined it. She has been worse for it than any volcano. But if she will leave it to me, I will cure it of what they have both done to it."

"It *is* good that I have come," thought Robin, "with Mrs. McGraw getting so smart about guessing what Bianca says." She made over Bianca's speech into a polite offer of help, which was, of course, exactly the way Bianca meant it.

Mrs. McGraw had kept a canny eye on the magic which Bianca's efforts had already wrought. "She might as well make herself busy with it. The devil finds work for idle hands and I'd like to balk him as far as possible." A speech which Robin made over into a gracious acceptance, which was, of course, exactly the way Mrs. McGraw meant it.

With the assurance that the garden was hers to do with as she liked, Bianca got to work. Robin was no longer allowed to sit in the gateway and sketch. Bianca ordered her about from one task to the next. And somehow Robin began to like grubbing about in the earth, and making things come alive again. The hard work made her so

hungry that Mrs. McGraw complained, with great satisfaction, that there was no keeping the larder stocked. As the smoke disappeared Robin stopped coughing, and grew round and brown in the clear sun.

The volcano slept quietly again, puffing out steamy wisps to show that it still boiled within. But every one, including Mrs. McGraw, paid no further attention to it. "If they don't disturb themselves about their own destruction, why should I?" she decided sensibly. And as there were no more signs of any one being destroyed, everybody became quite gay and light-hearted.

Bianca sang at her work, the queer sliding song, and Robin learned very well how to sing it with her. Now and then they could hear a low rumble from the kitchen which meant that Mrs. McGraw couldn't quite resist it. Tito rested mostly, which made him very happy, but too fat.

At the end of the first day Robin had feared that everything was about to be spoiled. Tired and hungry, and still a little edgy from the worry, they had gone into the house for supper. And then and there, Bianca had absolutely refused to sleep in the villa. Mrs. McGraw who had picked out a small room for her, and made it ready, was greatly incensed. They both talked very fast

at each other, and neither made any attempt to understand what the other was saying.

Bianca had whirled out of the house to get her Tito and go home, when Robin caught her. "Where *will* you sleep?" she implored. "You can't lie down in the garden!"

"I have told the old one, and she would not listen," Bianca flared. "Did I not go home with Tito while you rested, and bring back my own good mattress? And have I not my own little house by the garden? There I will stay, or nowhere! I told the old one." Bianca sounded final.

Suddenly Robin remembered the gardener's small plaster house at the edge of the garden. She had thought that Bianca was putting her tools in there. Of course she could have that little house! And there was a small tool shed behind it where Tito could sleep. Robin raced back to Mrs. McGraw, who was watching them unhappily at the window.

It was a critical situation, and by the time they were all fed and in bed, they were so exhausted that they slept too soundly to remember anything about it next morning.

The small villa, as Bianca called it, took on the color and life of its occupant. Robin made gay sketches of Tito all over the rough walls with

charcoal from the brazier. When Mrs. McGraw disapproved, she drew a picture of her that made her laugh and carry off her pail, suds, and scrubbing brush. Robin laughed, herself, a good deal these days. She could hardly remember when she had laughed so much. She wished that things would go on this way forever.

Then it all happened in one day. First Bianca came back from a visit to her mother looking very sober.

"My mother is coming home," she announced. "My uncle says that there is no further danger, and if the mountain should begin its wicked work again, he will save her at once." Bianca gleamed wickedly, and then sobered again. "I am glad that my mother returns, and I will find some work to support her. That is for me to do, not for my uncle," she finished with dignity.

Even Mrs. McGraw looked aghast. "You no sooner get used to one calamity in this heathen country when that is gone and another takes its place," she grumbled.

Robin did not know whether she meant the volcano or Bianca, and she was too sore-hearted to inquire. She went down to the small house with Bianca to help her load her few belongings on Tito's back. Bianca had kept the place full of

bright flowers, and as they stripped it, the gayety went with it. Even the sketches of Tito on the walls seemed forlorn and deserted when they closed the door on them.

When Bianca had tied up the mattress, she and Robin hoisted it on to Tito's back. Robin swung her end of it as easily as Bianca. Bianca nodded approvingly at her.

"You are strong now," she said. "The small boy is growing up."

Robin refused to be cheered. "I need you to keep me strong," she said.

Bianca laughed. "You need no one as much as you did," she remarked.

Robin considered. Perhaps that was so. She hadn't thought of it. She liked the new feeling she had of being able to do things for herself. Those sketches now. Even if they were no good, it had been fun to do them herself. And Bianca gave her all sorts of little jobs about the garden nowadays, just telling her to go ahead with them. Even if Bianca went away, she knew what there was to be done, and most of it she thought she could manage to do.

Robin looked very competent, standing straight and tall beside Tito, her hand on his flank. The sun had bleached her gold cap until it looked like

shining flax against the tan of her skin. Her blue eyes had lost their discontent, though they were mournful enough now at Bianca's departure. The little figure crouched under the olive tree weeks ago had had none of this air of self-reliance.

But she almost lost it when Mrs. McGraw appeared with a letter which had a Scotch stamp on it. She held out her hand for it and Mrs. McGraw waited while she opened it. "Now we shall know," she said with satisfaction, "what we are to do about going away."

"Yes," Robin thought, "and I shall know about my sketches, and next year—and, and, everything." So many things might be in that envelope that her fingers fumbled it when she tried to open it.

The beginning was concerned with their worry about the eruption, and their relief that it was over. Robin hurried over this part. That there had ever been darkness and danger seemed absurd in this golden sunshine and clear blue air!

Then came the part that made Robin feel as if a hand squeezed her throat.

> The drawings which you sent came safely. Father was glad that you labeled the picture of the castle, and he agrees with you in your opinion of the sketch

of the villa. (The hand tightened so that it was hard to breathe.)

To me it seems to point out an added reason for learning spelling. (I wonder how it could, Robin puzzled.) But he does think (the hand began to relax) that the donkey sketches show real originality. And he says to tell you that the fox-trotting baby is *fine!*

Robin lifted luminous eyes to Mrs. McGraw's anxious question. "Weel, do we go, or don't we? It's hard to tell now which your glad face might mean."

"Oh, I haven't found out yet." Robin read hastily on while Mrs. McGraw held an exasperated silence.

We have changed our plans again as I want to be within easy reach of your Grandfather Robin until he is thoroughly well. Spring is coming on now in Florence, and we'll all stay there with it (that means me, too!) until the hot weather drives us up into the Alps. Your father wants to make up the time he has lost on this trip, and he has decided to take you in hand for serious work. Though I insist that you learn how to spell, too. (I will, I will!)

You will like it, darling, (oh, won't I!) and, after all, I am rather glad that America can wait another year. We shall be back in Sicily again for

the winter. But I am enclosing a note for Growley which will tell her about leaving the villa. And when and where to meet us.

The part that followed about her cough Robin hurried over. The cough, like the volcano, no longer troubled any one. She thrust the enclosed note into Mrs. McGraw's hand.

"Here, Growley Darling, here's your letter. It will tell you all about everything." Robin never noticed what she had called Mrs. McGraw, and she buried her face so quickly in Tito's soft neck that she did not notice Mrs. McGraw's gratified look.

When Robin lifted her glowing face, she looked into Bianca's somber eyes. "There seems much to please everybody but me," she remarked. "We will go now, Tito and I."

Mrs. McGraw put out a restraining hand, her eyes still on her letter. "One minute, my girl, one minute."

In rapid Italian Robin was explaining her letter. When she came to the part about the return to Sicily, Bianca's face lightened. "So you do not go forever. I feared that you would never come back," she said simply.

Robin looked so stricken at the idea that she laughed. "You would not like it, too? *Bene!*"

Mrs. McGraw folded up her letter. "There's much to be considered," she sounded very businesslike. "We must be in Florence in four days. It was a piece of luck, after all, that the eruption got us so nearly ready to go. But there's the garden," she sounded troubled. "It's a great waste to leave a thriving garden like this one to die, with good to no one. Your father should not buy a villa if he does not mean to stick by it."

Robin solved the problem with one stroke. "Let Bianca have it. She could sell the vegetables instead of those the volcano ruined. Why not?"

Mrs. McGraw looked thoughtful. "Why not, indeed? She has worked hard on them. You don't suppose—ask her, Robin, if she and her silly mother would like to live in the small house and be caretakers until we come back. The letter bids me find one. The girl could do it, though her mother'd be no use. But I'd trust that girl."

For once neither Bianca nor Mrs. McGraw thought of bargaining. The arrangement was too perfect as it stood. "Tell the old one," said Bianca, and her eyes looked suspiciously bright without any of their wicked glint, "tell her *molte grazie*. Tell her that when she returns—she will return?" Robin whirled about and watched Mrs.

McGraw as anxiously as Bianca. Growley must come back; she needed her, and so did Bianca.

Mrs. McGraw looked down into the two intent, waiting faces. What she saw seemed to please her. She considered, and then half nodded. "I might for a bit."

There was a sigh of relief, and Bianca went on, "Tell her that when she returns, I will have for her such a garden as she has never seen in that cold country of hers. Or even here in the warmth and sunshine of my own. It shall be such a garden!" And Bianca looked as if she saw visions.

Robin's eyes held visions, too. A gay one in which she worked outdoors in the sunshine, helping Bianca and Tito with their job. And one which steadied and deepened the dream: herself, in the studio with father, making pictures which were her very own.

Tito may have had visions, too. His eyes were fast shut, but his ears twitched, and his jaw mumbled as if he were remembering the flavor of clover. Robin slipped a crumbly bit of sugar under his cool nose, and he looked at her with eyes that were wise and dark. The garden was a very pleasant place for him to live.

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